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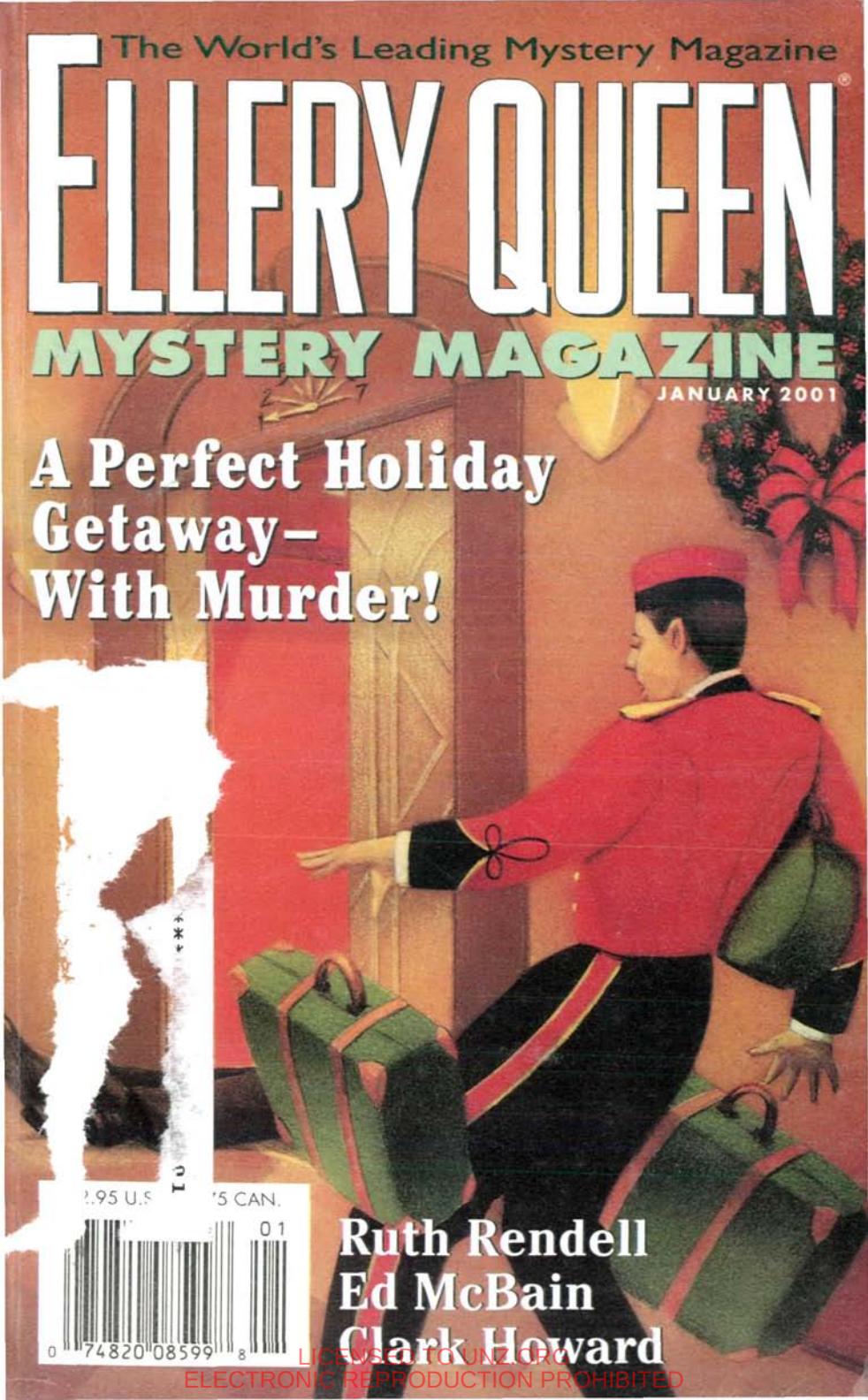

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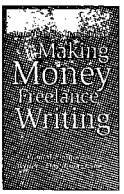

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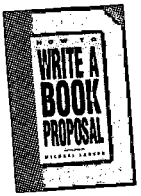

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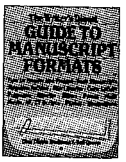

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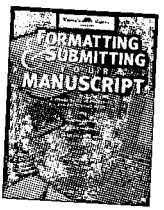

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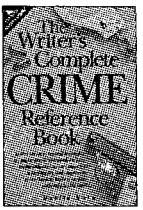

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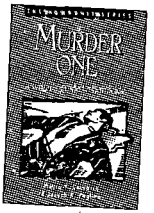

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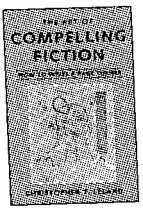

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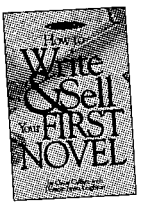

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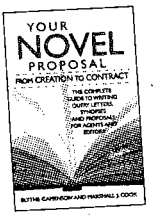

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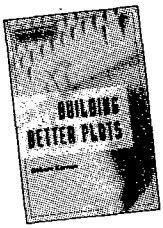

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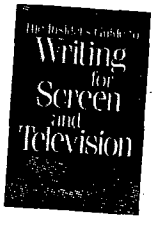

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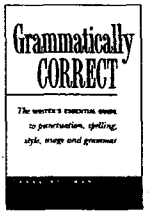

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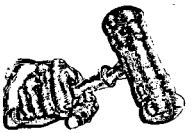

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I Killed Santa Claus

by Steve Hockensmith

After Christmas break, everyone in the dorm was talking about what they did over the holidays. People were like, "I watched twenty-two movies" and "I went to Cancun" and "I smoked a *lot* of pot, man."

When I got asked what I did, I would say, "I killed Santa Claus." Which would get a polite *ha ha*. And then I would say, "No, really. I'm not kidding." And then I would tell the story.

Before long, people were coming up to me all over campus saying, "Are you that Santa-killing chick?" I was famous. Or maybe infamous. It was pretty cool—for a while. But then I got sick of telling people about it over and over and over again. I mean, it's a pretty long story. So after a while when people came up and said, "Did you kill Santa Claus?" I would say, "Sorry, you've got me confused with somebody else. I killed the Easter Bunny."

©2000 by Steve Hockensmith

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Short story writer Steve Hockensmith has appeared in two of our sister publications: *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and *AHMM*. His name also sees print frequently thanks to his several jobs, which include editing two magazines, *Cinescape* and *The X-Files Official Magazine*, and contributing articles to publications such as the *Chicago Tribune* on a freelance basis. He debuts for *EQMM* with a wacky tale of Christmas at the mall. ¶

But I guess I could tell the story one more time. After that, I'm going to retire it. I won't tell it again until I've got kids I need to scare into line. "Don't mess with your mother, Jimmy. She offed St. Nick."

My own mom, she believes in the importance of work. For everybody. All the time. So one of the joys of coming home for me is finding out what kind of sucky job she's got lined up for me. During my first summer break, I worked for the dog census. You walk around to people's houses—or, in some of the neighborhoods I went to, *trailers*—and ask if they have a dog and, if so, does Fido have a license? Tons of fun, let me tell you. There's no better use for a cheery summer day than asking Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel if his mutt is registered with the county. And all for minimum wage. Thanks, Mom!

That Christmas, I wrapped presents at J. C. Penney until my fingers bled. The next summer, I went back to the dogs. Come Christmas, I was a squirter, chasing people around Dillard's with a perfume bottle. The summer after that, I was a waitress at Chuck E. Cheese—an experience I plan to talk to a therapist about one of these days.

So finally I reach the Christmas break of my senior year—my last chance to kick back and truly chill without the pressure of making it in "the real world" squeezing my soul like a vise. So does my mom give me a break and let me spend my vacation doing what *I* want to do, namely sucking candy canes and watching TV? Of course not. Instead I get The Speech.

"When your father ran off with that woman," it begins, "he left us to fend for ourselves. We don't have it easy. We can't sit around eating bonbons. We've got to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. That's exactly what I've done. I have worked hard, very hard, to keep this house and put food on the table and send you to college. But I can't do it alone. You've got to take some responsibility and—"

Yada yada yada, as they say.

After a few minutes of this tirade, all of which I know by heart, I said the only thing that will bring it to an end, which is, "You're absolutely right, Mother. How could I be so selfish? Please tell me

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what (mind-numbingly tedious minimum-wage) job you've found for me."

My mom smiled and said, "This one's going to be fun, Hannah," which sent a chill down my spine. If my mother thinks it's "fun," I reasoned, it's got to be hell. And I was right.

"You remember Missy Widgitz, Mark Widgitz's mother," she explained, referring to two people I have absolutely never heard of. "She just became the promotions director over at Olde Towne Mall. She's got a holiday position that would be perfect for you."

I sighed and said, "Great. Gift wrapping. I'll go get the Band-Aids."

Mom laughed—another ominous sign. "No, it's a lot better than that. They lost one of their elves."

There was a long pause, during which my mother stared at me with this big, goofy grin, waiting for me to say something upbeat like, "Wow! Really! Thanks, Mom!" But I was confused. Instead I said, "Lost . . . *elf*? What? They want me to help find it?"

Mom laughed again—it's nice to know I can provide her with so much cheap amusement. "No, no. They need an elf for Santa's Workshop."

I was still thinking I was supposed to be an Elf Wrangler, which doesn't make any sense, until it dawned on me. *You are the elf.* My blood ran cold.

"You start tomorrow," my mother said.

I slit my wrists and threw myself off the roof.

Okay, I didn't. But maybe I should have. Instead, I showed up at Olde Towne Mall the next day and reported for elf duty.

Here's what you need to know about Olde Towne Mall: When they say "Olde," they're not kidding. In fact, "Ye Olde Crappie Mall" would be a better name for the place. It's what used to pass for a shopping mall back in the 1970s, before River City got a real mall. It's all black tile and fluorescent lighting and fake plants and rednecks. The nicest store they've got is Sears.

At the exact center of this dump was the portal to hell otherwise known as Santa's Workshop. You know the drill: plywood house, plastic candy canes, animatronic reindeer, fake snow, fake everything. And the biggest fake of all sat on a throne lording over it all. Santa Claus. Or, as I came to know him, Big Bob.

Big Bob was *not* one of those professional Santa types you read about who grow their own beards and love children and act like playing St. Nick is a role worthy of Robert De Niro. Big Bob wore a big fake beard that was always a little bit crooked from being yanked by the screaming kids he obviously loathed. And he didn't smell like peppermint and warm cookies the way you think Santa would. He smelled like sweat and cigarettes and Pabst Blue Ribbon.

But his belly was real. And he laughed really loud. And he liked

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to sneak into people's homes at night. I didn't learn that last bit till later, though.

Big Bob had a love-hate thing going with me at first. Or I should say a lust-hate thing. I was the only female elf, an unfortunate situation made worse by the costume I had to wear—red tights, a green felt smock, and a red stocking cap, all about two sizes too small. I could barely squeeze myself into them. I was like a felt-wrapped sausage.

This led to a lot of ogling from both Big Bob and a disgustingly high percentage of the dads I had to deal with. I was the greeter elf, the one in charge of maintaining order in the line of supplicants to King Claus. When Junior's time came, I would walk him up the path to the stairs in front of Santa's throne. Then I would go back to the head of the line to make sure mom and dad didn't spoil this special moment by getting too close. Another elf—Arlo Hettle, a college kid like me—would step up and take a picture of Junior and Big Bob with a Polaroid camera. Then the third and final elf, a rat-faced little troll named Vince Kane, would escort Junior away while I brought up the next kid.

Even though Big Bob kept giving me come-hither looks as this cycle repeated itself over and over again, he would spaz out if I came too hither at the wrong moment.

"Y'see that gingerbread man there?" he told me on my first day. "I don't ever want to see you or anybody else on my side of that while I've got a kid on my lap."

"Okay," I said.

"It throws off my concentration."

"Okay."

"If anyone so much as sets a toe beyond that gingerbread man, there's gonna be trouble."

"Okay."

"I need to give these kids my full attention. I don't want any distractions."

"Okay, I understand."

He smiled at that. "Good. Now tell me. You a naughty girl or a nice one?"

As you can imagine, keeping my distance from Big Bob was not an issue for me. If that gingerbread man had been in the next county, it still would've been too close.

My first day, I asked Arlo, the camera kid, about our un-jolly Santa after we'd closed up the Workshop for the night. Arlo shrugged.

"He's been like that since day one, man," he said in a slow stoner drawl. He pushed a big pile of long, wavy hair out of his face—a gesture he had to repeat about every three seconds. "He's like all, 'Back off or I'll kick your ass.' And that Vince guy is like, 'Don't

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crowd Big Bob, dude.' And I'm like, 'Ooooooookay. Whatever. I'm just here to take the pictures, man.'"

"Big Bob?"

"That's what Vince calls him. I don't call him nothin' cuz I don't talk to the man, know what I'm sayin'?"

"So Vince and 'Big Bob' are friends?"

"Sure. Vince got him into the suit after Mr. Haney and Becky got hurt."

I sighed. Arlo was nice but not real good with explanations. "Becky and Mr. Haney?"

Arlo nodded. "Yeah."

I sighed again. "And they are . . . ?"

Arlo laughed that zonked stoner-guy laugh. "Oh, right. You didn't know them. Mr. Haney, he was the first Santa—the one before Big Bob. He was pretty nice, except he used to say things to me like, 'Just say no' and 'Users are losers.' I think he's in A.A. Becky was a greeter elf. They both lived on the East Side, so they'd, like, carpool. But one night some drunk ran 'em off the road. They ended up in the hospital."

"So Big Bob replaced Mr. Haney and I replaced Becky."

"No, you replaced Cheryl. She quit two days ago. She replaced . . . man, what was her name? Michelle. Yeah. Michelle replaced Becky."

"So why did Cheryl and Michelle quit?"

"Man, you're like Oprah or something. What's up with all the questions?"

"I want to know what I'm getting into, all right? This job seems a little weird."

"You got that right. I'd quit except my gig is just too easy. Point and click, point and click, all day. I show up stoned half the time and nobody notices."

Sure they don't, I thought to myself. "So Cheryl and Michelle . . . ?"

I think it was a Big Bob thing, y'know what I mean? He's hot for elfettes."

I thanked Arlo for his time. Perhaps thinking this had been some kind of relational breakthrough, he asked me if I wanted to go "get baked." I politely declined and went home and told my mom about the freaks I had to work with. Her response? "A job's a job." She said it in that Conversation Closed tone of voice that told me she thought I was just looking for an excuse to quit. And I was. And I kept right at it.

I became convinced that Vince and Big Bob were perverts. It fit the facts. You've got these two nasty-looking lowlifes insisting on complete privacy while they talk to little kids all day. It seemed so obvious. I couldn't understand how those parents could just stand there while their pride and joy sat helpless on Big Bob's pervy lap.

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Half these people looked like they'd been on *The Jerry Springer Show* at least once, probably throwing chairs at each other on a show called "My Daughter Married a Satan-Worshipping Transsexual!" yet the idea that something unsavory was going on right under their noses seemed completely beyond them. Something had to be done, and it looked like I had to do it.

Three times a day we got to put up a sign that said, "FEEDING THE REINDEER—BACK IN 15 MINUTES." Arlo would spend his break getting stoned in his Datsun. Vince and Big Bob always went off together for "a little pick-me-up" somewhere, or so they said. Sometimes Big Bob would invite me along, but I had better things to do—like find an empty stall in the women's bathroom and read John Grisham paperbacks, which was my usual routine. But one day while Santa and his other elves were off replenishing their Christmas spirit with various controlled substances, I went to see the woman responsible for the unfortunate situation at the North Pole—Olde Towne Mall's promotions director, Missy Widgitz.

A quick introduction to Missy: Imagine, if you will, a six-foot-two-inch Amazon with kabuki makeup, five-inch stiletto heels, and hair teased up so high the Swiss Family Robinson could build a treehouse in it. Now imagine that said Amazon fancies herself to be quite the on-the-go career woman. Now imagine me puking every time I had to deal with her.

I poked my head into Missy's office, and of course she was barking into the phone, deep in her wheeler-dealer routine.

"Have you been over to River Valley Mall, Charlie? They've got real elves over there! You know what I mean—midgets, dwarves, 'tiny people,' whatever they're called."

Her mascara-encrusted raccoon eyes caught a glimpse of me in the doorway and went all squinty. She waved one of her big hands at me, shooing me away.

"How am I supposed to compete with real elves?" she said, still glaring at me and waving her hand. "Tell me. Huh? How?"

I put up a finger—my index finger—meaning I just needed one minute of her time. "Hold on, Charlie," she growled. "Are you quitting?" she barked at me.

"Uhhh, no."

"Has somebody been hurt?"

"No."

"Did somebody grab you?"

"No. But I'm concerned about something."

She pointed to a box on her desk. It was overflowing with memos and newspaper clippings. "Put it in writing." Then she swiveled her chair around to face the wall. "Why should people come here when they can go to River Valley and see real elves?" she said. "I need more money, Charlie."

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End of conversation, obviously. I couldn't count on Missy Widgitz for squat. So I found an empty stall and began plotting.

Now it just so happens that my roommate's boyfriend is a kleptomaniac. He's in a band, so I think she just sees it as one of the cute little character flaws she has to put up with in order to date a musician. I just see it as pathetic. Anyway, whenever I come home from school, I play it safe and pack up everything of value I own. So stashed away in the back of my '84 VW Rabbit was a toaster, a CD/cassette player, some CDs, an almost-empty jewelry box, an Arran sweater, a tiny black-and-white TV, and the voice-activated tape recorder I use to record lectures.

Obviously, the toaster wasn't going to do me much good in this situation. Same with the CDs, the jewelry, the TV, and the sweater. But the tape recorder—that I could use.

The next morning, I did the unthinkable: I showed up for work early. I went to Santa's Workshop and tried to find the best place for the tape recorder. It had to be close enough to Santa's throne to pick up what Big Bob was saying, but not so close that Big Bob or Vince would see it or hear it when it clicked off. I thought about hiding it with the fake presents under a Christmas tree, but that was too far away. Same with the fake stockings hung over the fake fireplace and the fake toys on the fake worktable.

Fake fake fake. That made me think. What about Santa's "throne"? If it was as fake as everything else in the Workshop, wouldn't it be hollow? I leaned the throne over and found that I was right. I reached under and left the tape recorder there with the voice-activation feature turned on.

The day passed like every other work day—unbearably slowly. Two things broke the monotony: my fear that Vince or Big Bob would find the tape recorder and put two and two together (though, knowing them, it was most likely they'd get five) and a surprise visitor.

As our first break approached, I noticed that someone had parked a mummy in a wheelchair not far from Santa's Workshop. Though its entire body was covered in bandages and plaster, it had a human head—the head of a woman about my age. She was watching us with a strange, blank expression on her face, almost like she'd been hypnotized. When it was finally time to feed the reindeer, Arlo went up and started talking to her. I wasn't going to enjoy my John Grisham that day—I was too nervous about the tape recorder to worry about fictional lawyers—so I decided to introduce myself to the mummy.

"So what are you on? Codeine?" Arlo was saying as I walked up.

"Yeth, co-deine," the mummy girl mumbled, the words coming out of her mouth agonizingly slowly. She looked even more glassy-eyed close up. "And thome other thtuff. It helpth."

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"Got any you could spare?"

Mummy-girl stared at him for a moment, then turned her hollow eyes to me.

"Oh, hey, Hannah," Arlo said. "Becky, this is Hannah, the new elf."

"Hi, Becky."

"Hel-lo."

"Becky just got out of the hospital," Arlo said.

No duh, I thought, but what I said was, "Really?"

"Yeah. She was in a really bad car wreck over around Diamond and Weinbach. Some nut cut her off and forced her into a telephone pole. Right, Becky?"

Becky tried to nod, but it looked too painful. "Umm-hmmm," she hummed.

Finally it dawned on me. This was *the* Becky—the first greeter elf of the year, the one who'd been in an accident with Santa Claus. Arlo had probably forgotten that he'd told me about her—his memory wasn't too hot—so I played dumb:

"Was there anybody else in the car with you?" I asked.

"Umm-hmmm." She moved her eyes to Arlo again. "That'th why I'm here. I wanted to tell you in perthon, Arlo. Mr. Haney ith dead. He never came out of hith coma."

"No way," Arlo said.

"Yeth. I'm thorry."

Arlo shook his head. "Man, that sucks. He was a nice old guy."

There was a moment of silence—or at least as much silence as you can get in the middle of a mall at Christmastime. But then a booming "Ho ho ho!" made us all jump.

Big Bob came swaggering up with Vince not far behind. "Well, if it isn't my favorite little elf! How are ya, Betty?"

Becky looked like she wanted to disappear into her body cast like a turtle into its shell. "Fine," she said, her voice barely audible.

Big Bob leaned over and stroked her leg cast. "Good. You just keep healing, Betty. Then come see ol' St. Nick again when you're feeling more limber." He winked at her, then turned and gave me a wink, too. "Maybe we'll make a Santa sandwich with two slices of elf."

He let out a wheezy laugh, a sound that made me want to rip off his beard and stuff it down his pervy throat. Instead I said, "Mr. Haney's dead." I guess I was trying to embarrass him. I should've known that was impossible. You have to be capable of feeling shame to be embarrassed.

He stopped laughing, but his eyes still twinkled with cruel glee. "Oh, that's a shame. You hear that, Vince?"

Vince nodded silently. The news actually seemed to shake him up, which surprised me. I wouldn't have given him credit for a human emotion like sadness.

"Well, this Santa's going to be a lot more careful who he hitches

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a ride from," Big Bob said, giving Becky one last leer. "Bye now. Break-time's over." He walked away singing "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," Vince trailing him like a broken-spirited dog.

Something about the exchange bothered me—something beyond the fact that Big Bob was a dirty old lech. It wasn't a solid thought or suspicion, just a strange sensation, kind of like the vague feeling of dread I get when I'm taking a test and I think I just wrote down the wrong answer. The clue phone's ringing, but I can't find the phone, let alone pick it up.

"So, Becky," I said, not really sure what words were going to come out next, "did they ever catch the guy who ran you off the road?"

"No. The copth think it wath thome joy-riding kidth. They found the car not far from uth—it had been thtolen."

I put in a little more chitchat out of the spirit of Christmas charity, then said goodbye to Becky and let Arlo get back to wheedling for prescription medication. A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman appeared carrying a bunch of boxes and bags. She piled them up on top of Becky and wheeled her away.

"That Becky's mom?" I asked Arlo as he trudged back towards Santa's Workshop, obviously unsuccessful in his mission and not too happy about it.

"Yeah. I was this close to scoring some Demerol and then whoosh, here comes Momma."

"Demerol? Geez, Arlo, can't you just say no?"

"Man, I can't even say 'maybe.'"

A goofy stoner grin creased his droopy-eyed face, and my heart sank. I'd been thinking about telling him what I was up to, trying to enlist him as a partner, a sidekick. But could a guy like Arlo be trusted? He'd be like Tonto on 'ludes, a brain-damaged Dr. Watson, Robin the Boy Wonder with Attention Deficit Disorder.

No, thanks. This elf was on her own.

The last seconds of our break melted away, and the usual assortment of squirmy, mouthy kids and testy parents began lining up again. Big Bob assumed the throne and gave me a nod—and another disgusting wink—and I began leading the little lambs to the slaughter.

"Just go up the stairs and tell Santa what you want," I told the first victim when we reached the gingerbread man. She stumbled up the steps shyly. As I turned to go, I heard Big Bob let out a "Ho ho ho" and ask, "What's your name, little girl?"

And ding-dong, it hit me. Names. A few minutes before, Big Bob couldn't get poor Becky's name right. He kept calling her "Betty." But when I had told him "Mr. Haney's dead," he didn't bat an eye. He knew exactly who I was talking about. But to him, wouldn't Mr. Haney just be some poor slob he'd never met? Why should he remember his name—or even know it in the first place?

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It was thin, and I knew it. There's Becky/Betty in a wheelchair and we tell him somebody's died—who else would we be talking about? But, still, it gnawed at me. I couldn't escape the feeling that things were even seamier in Santa's Workshop than I'd imagined.

I couldn't wait to get my hands on that tape.

But I had to wait. Hours and hours, each one crawling by like the week before spring break. Finally, we roped off the entrance, hustled the last few kids through, and called it quits for the day. Usually, Vince and Big Bob would blast out of there so fast you'd think they'd been shot out of a cannon. Not tonight, of course. They were hanging out next to the throne—next to the tape recorder—talking and throwing ominous looks in my direction. I killed a little time chatting with Arlo, but he had a big party to get ready for and couldn't stick around long.

I went to the restroom and used my regular stall to change into civilian clothes. I tried to polish off another chapter of Grisham, but visions of car accidents and Big Bob's evil grin kept muscling the words out of my head. After rereading the first paragraph for the fifth time, I threw the book into my shoulder bag and decided it was *Mission: Impossible* time.

When I got back to Santa's Workshop, Arlo, Vince, and Big Bob were gone. There were still plenty of shoppers—the mall would be open for another ninety minutes—so I did a slow circuit around the Workshop, checking to see if anyone was watching me from the stores nearby. There were no familiar faces leering at me, so I hopped over the faux-velvet rope, hurried up the path to Santa's throne, slipped a hand underneath, and grabbed the tape recorder. I stuffed it into my bag and rushed back up the path and around the corner to the nearest exit, congratulating myself on my craftiness and nerve. But as I pushed through the glass door into the biting night air, I heard something that knocked the craftiness and nerve right out of me.

"Well, hello there."

His beard was gone, replaced by a cigarette that dangled from his curled lips, and he wasn't wearing his red and white suit. But there was no mistaking that smarmy voice and those bright, insinuating eyes.

I stopped and caught my breath. "Geez! Bob. You scared me."

"Scared you?" He seemed to like that. He chuckled. "Are you frightened of ol' Bob?"

I shook my head overemphatically. "No, no, of course not. But, you know, a man steps out at you in the dark, it's scary."

Big Bob nodded. "Sure, I understand. That's why I'm here, actually. I thought someone should walk you to your car."

I tried to do a quick scan of the area without being too obvious. It was late, but shoppers were still coming and going. There

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wasn't as much light as I would have liked, but he wouldn't try something in a public place . . . would he?

"That's okay," I told him with a fakey little laugh. "You don't have to do that. I know karate." I put up my hands and did a little *hiii-yay,* Jackie Chan style.

Big Bob laughed and copied the gesture. "Really? That's great. I know karate, too. Maybe you and I should go at it sometime."

Suddenly, fear wasn't ruling my mind anymore. Anger was. I'm kind of dangerous like that. When something gets me p.o.'d, everything else—including common sense—goes flying out the window. And Big Bob's good-ol'-boy condescension was definitely getting me p.o.'d. "Yeah, well, enough chitchat. Gotta go. Bye." I turned and stalked off at maximum speed.

"Hey, hold on there!" Big Bob grunted. He sounded genuinely surprised.

I didn't stop.

"Hold on!"

I heard him start to run after me. A big, fat hand wrapped itself around my upper arm. I whirled around, tearing myself out of his grip.

"Do you want me to start screaming now? Because I will. Loud."

Big Bob took a step back, his hands up. "Okay, okay, don't touch the merchandise. I understand." He smiled again, a tight grin that pushed his cigarette up toward his nose and seemed to curl in on itself at the corners, just like the Grinch Who Stole Christmas. "I won't follow you if you don't want my protection. I'll just watch you from right here."

"Fine," I said.

But of course it wasn't. It was really creepy. I looked back once when I was halfway to my car, and he was still there, watching me. I checked again in the rearview mirror as I drove away, and there he was, waving.

I was a couple of blocks away when the real significance of it hit me. Now he knew what my car looked like. Or maybe he'd already known. He'd been waiting for me at the right exit. Had he been spying on me? Or was it all just a coincidence? Maybe he was having a smoke and out I came and he decided to have a little fun. Or maybe the fun was going to come later. . . .

I watched the cars behind me, wondering if I was being followed. I didn't see anything suspicious, but then again, how would I know? Who am I, Jane Bond?

I started to feel paranoid, silly, stupid. Maybe I was imagining everything. Maybe I needed to stop reading John Grisham books.

And then I remembered the tape. That would settle everything.

If only.

When I got home, I rushed upstairs to my room, ignoring Mom's

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"Dinner's in the fridge!" from the living room. I pulled the tape recorder out of my bag and popped out the tape. It had stopped about a fifth of the way through the first side. It had recorded something! I slapped it back into the machine and pushed the rewind button. It started to rewind just fine, but it quickly slowed down to a crawl. The little red power light began to flicker and fade.

Great. The batteries were dying. I pushed play and heard something that sounded like the moans of a depressed cow.

"... mmmmmmmmmmeeeeellllllllllllooooooooooooody ..."

I took the tape out and put it in the cassette player of my stereo. When I pushed play, a stream of incomprehensible squeaks blasted from the speakers. It was like Alvin and the Chipmunks after they'd inhaled helium. The tape had recorded so slowly, the voices were being sped up and distorted when played back at normal speed.

I rewound the tape to the beginning, hoping the recorder had captured something incriminating before it ran out of juice. I pushed play.

"Your elf is looking nice today," someone said in a nasal, whiny drawl. It sounded like Vince.

"She looks nice every day." Big Bob.

"I don't know how she squeezes into those tights."

"I'm gonna squeeze in there with her one'a these days."

They both laughed. I felt like hurling.

Vince: "That's what you say about all of 'em. [Brief pause.] So whadaya think of these first two? The boy and the woman."

Big Bob: "Ahhhhh, I don't know. Look kinda trailer trash to me."

Vince: "Some of those trailer-trash types don't believe in banks, if you know what I mean."

Big Bob: "Yeah, but a lot of them believe in shotguns, if you know what *I* mean. [Brief pause.] Okay. Here we go. Pardon me while I get into character."

A very rude noise erupted from my stereo. Another voice could be heard, very quiet, saying, " . . . up and tell Santa what you want." It was me.

Big Bob: "Ho ho ho! And how are you doing, little fella?"

His voice was starting to sound sped-up, distorted. The tape recorder hadn't made it too far before it started slowing down.

Little Boy: "Okay."

Big Bob: "Why don't you come up here and sit on Santa's lap."

Little Boy: "Okay."

Big Bob: "Therethat'sbetternowwhydon'tyoutellSantayourname?"

The distortion was getting worse and worse.

Little Boy: "Paul."

Big Bob: "What'syourlastname,Paul?There'salotofPaulsintheworld."

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Little Boy: "Riley."

Big Bob: "Andwheredoyoulive,Paul?"

Little Boy: "Melodyhills."

Big Bob: "AndareyougoingtobehomeforChristmassqueaksqueak-squeak. . . ."

The squeaking went on for another fifteen seconds or so, then *click,* I was listening to a Psychology of Childhood lecture from a few weeks before.

So that was all I got on tape—a vaguely sinister exchange about "trailer trash," a few comments about my butt, and the sound of Big Bob passing gas. As they say in the movies, "It wouldn't stand up in a court of law." It wouldn't even stand up in the food court at the mall. It wouldn't do anything. It was useless.

So I did the only thing I could, being kind of stubborn and kind of mad and maybe a little bit crazy. The next day I left for work early and stopped off to buy new batteries on the way in. The tape recorder went back under Santa's throne.

The day passed even more slowly than the day before. It was creepy seeing Big Bob and Vince up there eyeing me, knowing, no, I'm not being paranoid, they *are* talking about me. And soon I'd know exactly what they were saying.

The only thing that broke the day's routine for a few seconds was a surprise visit from our beloved employer just as our first break was coming to an end.

"Gather 'round, troops, chop-chop," Missy commanded, snapping her fingers.

The four of us sauntered over slowly, Arlo and Vince and Big Bob exchanging silent, surly glances. For just a moment, they were united in their contempt for the She-Hulk. I kept my eyes down.

"I'm going to need all of you to come in an hour early tomorrow. We've finally got a way to top River Valley Mall." She flashed me a happy smirk as she announced this, perhaps deluded for a second into thinking I gave a rat's ass about topping River Valley Mall.

Arlo took the bait. "What is it?"

Missy placed a long, enamel-encrusted fingernail on her lips. "Shhh. Top secret."

"That's gonna count as overtime, ain't it?" Big Bob asked.

Missy looked down at him—maybe he was "Big" Bob, but she was a good three inches taller than him—and pretended to mull it over. "We'll see about that." She dismissed us with two claps of her big paws. "Okay, that's all. Let's see some smiles and Christmas cheer."

"All I want for Christmas," I mumbled to Arlo as she marched away, "are her two front teeth."

Big Bob guffawed. "That's pretty good!" He turned to face me, and suddenly I regretted having said anything. "Are you sure

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that's all you want? Cuz ol' Santa'd love to fill your stocking, if you know what I mean."

I was torn between slapping his ugly face and running away and hiding. My mouth chose a different response without consulting my brain. "No, I don't know what you mean," I said. "Why don't you explain yourself."

Big Bob grinned. "I mean I'd like to come down your chimney some night."

Vince snickered. I shook my head.

"I still don't follow you, Bob. Be more clear."

"I'm saying I'd like to . . ." Big Bob's brow creased. He'd already run out of metaphors. ". . . jingle your bells."

That actually made me laugh. Big Bob's grin disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"You want to 'jingle my bells'? What are you talking about, Bob? Please, try to choose your words carefully and speak slowly, because I'm not following this at all."

Big Bob's face was turning as red as his Santa suit. "You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" he snarled. "Well, you're not. You're just a dumb bitch. And one day soon you're gonna learn just how dumb you are—I guarantee it." He turned around and stalked up the path to his workshop. "Come on, Vince."

Vince lingered behind for a moment, a scowl twisting his small, sharp face. He reminded me of a little, snarling schnauzer. The image helped me keep a smile on my face until he turned to go. The second he wasn't looking, the smile melted. I felt like I was going to melt, too.

"Oh, God, why do I do these things?"

"Don't ask me," Arlo said.

"I wasn't asking you, I was asking God. But as long as you're butting in, I should thank you for standing up for me. You're my knight in hemp armor, Arlo."

Sarcasm doesn't work too well on stoners, so all I got was a confused "Huh?" I gave up and went back to work.

I endured hours of stares and glares from Vince and Big Bob before it was finally quitting time. The last thing I wanted was another after-work encounter with either one of them, so I went to my stall and spent the next couple of hours trying to read a Scott Turow book. When I finally emerged, it was closing time. All the shoppers had scurried home—or over to River Valley Mall—and most of the stores were already locked up for the night. They'd even pulled the plug on Santa's Workshop. The lights were off and the animatronic reindeer were frozen in mid-prance.

I moved slowly up the path toward the Workshop, afraid I'd trip over a cardboard candy cane or plastic elf in the half-light. When I

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reached Santa's throne, I lifted up one side, reached under . . . and found nothing.

Two shapes, one large, one small, emerged from the shadows behind the big Christmas tree at the back of Santa's Workshop.

"See. I told ya it wasn't that doper kid," Big Bob said.

"Umm-hmm," Vince replied.

As they moved out of the darkness, I could see that they were both still wearing their costumes. Big Bob had something in his hand. "You lookin' for this?" he asked me. He held up my tape recorder.

"No," I said. "I left my keys around here somewhere. I came back to find them."

"Left your keys . . . under my chair?" Big Bob shook his head. "Ho ho ho. Come on, smart girl. You can think up something better than that."

They were still moving toward me, slowly, like you'd creep up on an animal you're trying not to spook—an animal you're trying to catch. I started backing away, matching them step for step.

"There are still people around. I could start screaming."

Big Bob smiled, but he stopped moving forward. Vince stopped, too.

"Why would you go and do that?" Big Bob said. "We're just a couple of coworkers having an innocent after-work talk." He waved the tape recorder. "I want to know what this is all about, that's all. We heard it this morning. It makes a real big click when it reaches the end of a side, y'know. Vince here thought it was Arlo up to something, but I knew better. I'd just like you to tell me why you'd do a thing like this."

For the first time ever, my mouth failed me. "Well, Bob, you see . . ." I said, and stopped there. I couldn't think of anything else.

"Come on, now. You can be honest. Have I done something to offend you?"

"Yeah, that's it," I blurted, grateful for the suggestion. "Those things you say to me—that's sexual harassment. I was going to take the tape to Missy Widgitz."

Big Bob nodded. "Sure, that makes sense. Except . . . hmmm." He stroked his beard and rolled his eyes. "If that's what you were doin', why would you put the tape recorder under my chair? The only time we talked today was way over there where Missy Bitchitz gave us our marching orders. Why wouldn't you squeeze the tape recorder into those little tights of yours and record me that way? You didn't even try to get me closer to the chair when we were having our little chat."

"I guess I didn't have a very good plan," I said, taking another step back.

Big Bob and Vince each took a step forward.

"Now, guys," I said, completely unsure what was going to come

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out of my mouth next. It turned out to be a stunned grunt. As I stepped back again the world turned sideways and suddenly I found myself lying on top of something big and prickly. I'd tripped over the little cardboard Santas that line the path leading to the Workshop and fallen backwards onto a Christmas tree.

"Get her," Big Bob said.

I rolled up onto my feet just in time to face Vince no more than four feet away from me. He was rushing at me crouched down with his arms stretched out, like a mime imitating a crab. As he moved in, I stepped to the side, grabbed one of his spindly little arms, and swung with all my might. To my utter shock, it worked. Vince went stumbling out of control into another Christmas tree. He crashed into it and rolled to the ground in a tangle of lights and tinsel.

I swung around to see Big Bob lumbering down the steps from his throne. "See! I wasn't lying about knowing karate," I lied.

He didn't even slow down. It was time to run.

I turned and sprinted to the nearest exit, unsure whether anyone was following me or not and too scared to turn around and look until I'd pushed through the glass door into the cold December air. The door closed with a loud clack behind me. I instantly realized my mistake.

Big Bob and Vince hadn't followed me. The door had just locked itself. And I was a long, long way from my car.

Genius that I am, I hadn't parked in my usual spot that morning. I didn't want Big Bob waiting for me outside when I left at night, so I'd parked down by Value City on the other side of the mall. So now I was going to have to walk all the way around the parking lot in the dark to get to my car.

Did I say *walk?* Try run.

I didn't see anyone as I raced toward Value City. There were still a few cars in the parking lot, but the people they belonged to were inside the mall somewhere, locking up or counting money or molesting mannequins or whatever it is people do after closing time. I could see cars moving way over on Diamond Avenue, but I knew I was nothing to them—just a speck moving in the dark almost a half-mile away.

I noticed two strange things as I ran. There was a big trailer-truck parked by the side of the mall, the kind you see on the highway loaded with cows on their way to Hamburger Heaven. And the trailer stank. Of course, I didn't stop to ponder either of these mysteries. I had things to do, people to escape from.

I came flying around the corner of the mall just a few dozen yards from where I was parked. And then I went flying right back around the way I'd come. I'd caught a quick glimpse of something red and white and big coming out of the exit nearby. A second later, I heard someone yell, "Hey!"

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I had three options: (A) just keep running running running and hope that I ran into somebody before Big Bob and Vince ran into me, (B) hide, or (C) pray for a divine intervention. I was already pretty winded—too many late-night pizzas and cigarettes at school had taken their toll—and I'm not too religious, so I went for option B. And, hey, I could do plenty of praying once I was hidden.

Of course, the secret to hiding is finding what hiding experts call "a hiding place." I figured I had about twelve seconds to do this. Behind the bushes? No. Under a car? No. In the stinky trailer?

Maybe.

I dashed around to the back of the trailer. It wasn't the kind that opened by folding up like a garage door. It had doors that swung open on hinges. And there was no lock, just a series of metal bolts. I undid them as quickly as I could, cracked open a door, slipped through, and pulled the door closed. Once inside the trailer, there was no way to lock the door again or even keep it completely shut. Which made me realize that this wasn't exactly the best hiding place—there was no escape route. If Vince and Big Bob figured out where I was, there was no way to get out except the way I came in. This is why I'm not a "hiding expert."

This depressing realization was gnawing at my brain, completely distracting me from my praying, when things seemed to get worse. Something behind me moved. I heard a grunt, then heavy footsteps, then more grunting. I turned around slowly—and couldn't see a thing. It was pitch black in there. But something told me it was crowded. The grunting and footsteps seemed to spread all around me. And then I noticed the smell again. It was like a petting zoo multiplied by two pig farms and a dozen wet dogs.

As alarming as all this was, even more alarming was the fact that I wasn't the only one who'd noticed it. There were narrow slots in the side of the trailer, and through them I could see Big Bob and Vince walking slowly past.

"You hear that?" Vince asked.

"I hear it," Big Bob grunted. He walked over to the trailer and stuck his fat face up against one of the slots. I was tempted to run up and poke those beady eyes of his, but almost immediately he stepped back, waving a hand in front of his face. "Can't see a thing in there. Can smell plenty, though. Whoooooeeee."

Big Bob walked around to the back of the trailer, Vince trailing him like a faithful dog.

"Well, look at this," I heard Big Bob say.

That was my cue to move to the back of the trailer. Whatever was in there with me—cows, sheep, unicorns—I figured they couldn't be too dangerous. Someone's going to leave a truckload of bears at a mall?

I moved away from the doors blindly, my arms stretched out in

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front of me like the Mummy. The snorting and stamping around me got louder, which actually helped. Snort, wheeze, okay I'll move a little more this way. Stamp, shuffle, okay I'll move a little more that way.

I was almost halfway to the back when Big Bob opened the door. Just enough light streamed in for me to see him, him to see me, and both of us to see what was in the trailer.

Reindeer. Nine of them. Big ones.

We were both dumbstruck. Reindeer? And then I remembered Missy Widgitz's big surprise. So this was how she was going to get a leg up on River Valley Mall.

I don't know if Big Bob figured it out or not. Once he'd accepted the reindeers' presence, he probably didn't care. The look of surprise faded from his face and he smiled at me and said, "You'd better come out of there."

"I don't think so."

"You'd better come out or we're comin' in."

Vince pushed in behind Big Bob. "I don't wanna go in there, Bob," he said in a hoarse whisper.

Big Bob shot him an annoyed glance. "You're afraid of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?"

Vince peered into the trailer. The reindeer were spread out all around me, their breath coming out in long puffs of steam. "They look awful big," he said.

"Well, I'm awful big, too," Big Bob snapped. He started to haul himself up into the trailer.

Now this is where my story's going to diverge a bit from the official account. I told the police that when I saw Big Bob coming at me, I screamed. Which is kind of true. I did scream. I screamed, "Yah! Yah!" And I stamped my feet. And I slapped the nearest reindeer on the butt.

Blitzen jumped, bumping into Comet and Cupid, who got spooked and bolted. And when a couple of reindeer bolt, the others tend to follow.

Big Bob didn't scream. He didn't have time. He just fell back out of the truck and let out one loud "Ow!" All I could hear after that was the sound of big hooves hitting something soft and wet. When I finally worked up the nerve to peek outside, there were nine reindeer spread out all over the Olde Towne Mall parking lot—and Big Bob was spread out all over the pavement behind the truck. Vince was long gone.

It took about five minutes for the cops to show up. The TV news vans were there in ten. I think I was still in shock at that point. I caught a glimpse of myself on TV the next day. I was getting put in a police car—my mom practically fainted when she saw they'd put that on the news—with this blank expression on my face. I

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looked like I'd been hanging out with Arlo.

It took awhile for me to pull my words together, but finally I got out the whole story about Big Bob and Vince and the tape. The cops were pretty nice, but they just sort of nodded their heads and looked concerned and asked me if I wanted to speak with a counselor. After a couple of hours, my mom came and took me home.

I think the cops assumed it was an attempted rape. The newspaper and TV stations didn't come right out and say it, but they hinted the same thing. At first. But then a day later, there on the front page of the *Courier-Press* was the headline: "Police Uncover Santa Burglary Ring."

The story started off with something like, "River City law-enforcement officials have revealed that the man smooshed by reindeer earlier this week at Olde Towne Mall was Robert 'Big Bob' Thomerson, a.k.a. Robert Thompson, a.k.a. Robert Thomas, a.k.a. Thomas Roberts, a career criminal with multiple convictions for home invasion, burglary, and theft. Police suspect that Thomerson was attempting to use his position as Olde Towne's resident Santa Claus to identify families that would be on vacation over the holidays, making their homes targets for break-ins. Sources also reveal that Thomerson might have secured his position through foul play: Yesterday afternoon police technicians found his fingerprints in a car that was involved in an accident that cost the mall's previous Santa, William Haney of Owensboro, his life. Authorities are confident that the capture of Thomerson's suspected accomplice, Vince 'The Elf' Kane, is imminent."

I was pretty impressed by River City's finest. It had taken some real brains to connect all the dots. And then I thought, "Did it really?" Maybe it didn't take brains at all. Maybe all it took was a tape—a tape that could have been found in Big Bob's pocket, untrampled, by cops checking out my story.

Of course, the article didn't have a sentence like, "Detectives gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Hannah Fox, whose paranoia and near-crazy risk-taking made these breakthroughs possible."

But that was okay. There was an even better bit towards the end. "Thomerson's position at Olde Towne has raised disturbing questions about the mall's hiring practices. 'I assure you, we're going to be investigating this thoroughly and taking steps to ensure that it never happens again,' said Debra Raines, Olde Towne's new promotions director. According to Raines, the mall will discontinue its 'Santa's Workshop' operation for the rest of the holiday season."

Which meant I was unemployed, and there was nothing my mom could say about it. I'd been attacked, traumatized by vile criminals. It would take me weeks to recover—weeks spent sucking candy canes and watching TV.

It was going to be a merry Christmas after all. ●

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THE SAN AGUSTIN MIRACLE

by Edward D. Hoch

You still hear occasional stories about the miracle at the San Agustin Mission on that September afternoon in 1899, and Ben Snow was there to see it happen. He'd spent most of the year in the Arizona Territory, earning money at odd jobs, and had finally drifted south to Tucson. A city of about 7,500 residents, it was located on the often-dry Santa Cruz River. Tucson had begun life as a military garrison under Spanish and Mexican rule, and even with the arrival of the railroad and settlers from the east it remained more than half Mexican as the century was ending.

There was copper mining in the hills, but it was also cotton country, which surprised Ben. Even more surprising was Jud Withers, a leathery-skinned man in his fifties who'd been a Confederate soldier thirty-five years earlier. He was the first man Ben met when he rode into town, and he had a story to tell over a beer at a local saloon with the unlikely name of Custer's Café.

"Bet you never knew that Confederate troops occupied Tucson back in sixty-two, did you?" he asked Ben, obviously launching into a favorite and familiar story. "It was the cotton that brought us, of course. The Union wanted to keep slaves out of the new states and territories, and we rode across the desert from west Texas to seize the area. I do believe this was the furthest west the Confederate Army ever got."

"How long were you here?" Ben asked, sipping his beer. He'd

A recent *Kirkus* review of Mr. Hoch's new collection of Nick Velvet stories, *The Velvet Touch,* hailed the veteran author as "the last mystery writer whose appeal is based on sheer ingenuity." "Hoch is astonishingly inventive in varying his offbeat puzzles," the review went on. "Enough prestidigitation to explain why Hoch (800 stories and counting) is short fiction's answer to *The Mousetrap.*"

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spent half his lifetime listening to stories in bars.

"Well, not long," Jud Withers admitted. "But I wasn't driven out like the rest of 'em. Married me a sweet young Injun gal and settled down here. She's dead now, but I'm still hanging on. I'll see the twentieth century if I'm lucky."

Ben signaled the barkeep for a refill and tossed a silver dollar on the polished wood. "Any jobs around here?"

"In the cotton fields?"

"I was thinking more of ranching. How's the weather been?"

"Well, we just finished our rainy season. Everything's growing nice." Eyeing Ben's gunbelt he asked, "You from around here?"

"I've been up north, riding the circuit with Judge Hark. Sort of a bodyguard job."

"Don't have too much call for bodyguards. Things are pretty peaceful around here."

"I can do cowhand chores. It wouldn't be the first time."

"You don't want to be in one place. You're a traveling man. I can see that. There's a Mexican coming up this way in a few days with a hot-air balloon. He gives exhibitions. He might need somebody to travel with him, handle his gear."

Ben was skeptical. "A balloon?"

"The Mex is really good, I hear tell. Pancho Quizas is his name. He and his wife have been working the border towns, and this time of year they come a bit farther north. They used to have somebody with them, but they're traveling alone now."

Ben Snow had seen fliers, men with wings strapped to their bodies, launching themselves from a cliff or high platform, relying on air currents to carry their wings of cloth some distance before depositing them gently on the ground. He'd watched one of them in Texas a few years back. The man had been killed while flying, but that was another story. A balloon was something else, and it might be worth a look.

A young woman at the back of the room had mounted a small stage and was strumming a guitar. Ben left the bar and walked back in that direction. He expected she might sing something by Stephen Foster, or perhaps one of the Civil War songs still popular in the region, but instead she seemed to be reciting poetry to the guitar accompaniment. Ben listened to one about a cactus flower, and when she ended to a smattering of applause he asked her who wrote it.

"I did," she replied softly, and Ben took a closer look at her. She was maybe in her late twenties, a decade or so younger than him, with long silky hair the color of sand. She was dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, with a sombrero hanging at the back of her neck.

"Do you write much poetry like that?"

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She blushed a bit. "It's meant to be a song, but I'm not too good at blending the words and music yet."

"You have a nice voice. You should put the sombrero out for tips."

"Thank you." She went back to strumming her guitar, making no effort to remove the hat from her neck.

"What's your name?"

"Gert."

"Fellow at the bar was just telling me about a Mexican who flies in a balloon."

"Sure, that's Pancho Quizas. I met him once, down south. He'll be here any day now, maybe tomorrow."

"I'd like to meet him. Could you introduce us?"

"Sure could, if I knew your name."

"It's Ben. Ben Snow."

"Familiar kind of name. You from around these parts?"

"Off and on."

"Where can I find you, when Pancho shows up?"

"I'll be around. Any good card players in this town?"

"You were just talkin' to the best of them. Jud Withers."

Ben glanced around at the old Confederate. "Thanks," he said and moved away.

Withers told him there'd be no card game that night but to come back the next night, which was Saturday. Ben found a room he could rent over the stable where he'd boarded Oats, and decided to sleep there until the Mexican showed up. The following evening after supper he stopped in Custer's Café and found a game already in progress. Jud Withers spotted him at once and waved him over to the table.

"Got a place all saved for you, Ben. Sit right here."

He slid into the wooden armchair and nodded greetings to the other three men at the table. All were younger than Jud Withers and at least one, seated with his back to the wall, had the look of a gunfighter with his black shirt and matching gunbelt. Ben felt like telling him his time had passed, that the West was getting civilized now, but if he said it the kid probably would have drawn on him. His name was Scooter Colt and he didn't offer to shake hands after Withers introduced them.

The other two were a Mexican named Sanchez and a well-dressed cotton farmer named Edgar Blaise. There was a sixth chair at the table and Ben was surprised when the poetic guitar player named Gert appeared from the back of the room to claim it. "I like poker," she told Ben as she sat down.

Withers brought out a new deck of cards and they started a game of stud poker. Gert seemed more at ease with the cards than with her guitar, and before long she was ahead. Scooter Colt's eyes

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were on her, especially when she dealt. Ben couldn't decide whether he was guarding against cheating or merely admiring her breasts.

They'd been playing for about an hour when the doors of Custer's Café swung open to allow the entry of a tall Mexican with a goatee, carrying a tattered carpetbag. Jud Withers immediately stopped the game with a wave of his hand. "Pancho! We've been expecting you."

In his black suit and string tie Pancho Quizas looked more like a mortician than a flying man. He appeared to carry no weapon, though Ben couldn't be certain a derringer wasn't concealed in his breast pocket. When he smiled, a gold tooth sparkled. "It took longer than expected with the balloon," the Mexican explained in slightly accented English. "Elana is still a few miles out of town with the wagon."

"Want to sit in for a few hands?" the Confederate asked.

"Perhaps later."

Ben dropped out of the hand and followed Pancho over to the bar. After introducing himself, he said, "Withers told me you might be interested in someone to handle your gear."

"*Sí.* It is difficult for my wife. Tonight, handling the wagon, she is tired. But she insists I come ahead to arrange for lodgings."

"If you hire me I'll ride out now and meet her. Did you come from the border?"

Pancho Quizas nodded. "Nogales."

"I know that trail. I'll meet her and help with the wagon."

"I would be grateful, Ben Snow."

"Just Ben is good enough. We'll talk about money when I get back."

He retrieved Oats from the stable, saddled up, and took the road south. About fifteen minutes out of town he spotted the wagon's lanterns and slowed Oats to a trot. The two horses pulling the wagon had run out of energy, leaving the frustrated woman yanking uselessly at the reins. Ben could barely see her in the dim lantern glow, but he quickly identified himself to calm her fears.

"Your husband sent me out to help you. This is quite a load you're hauling."

"It shifted after he rode off. I think one of the ropes broke. I couldn't fix it in the dark."

Ben dismounted and took the nearest lantern, going back to inspect the wagon's cargo. The balloon itself was deflated into a pile of limp fabric, but there was also a large wicker bucket and a heater of some sort, all of which added weight to the wagon. He took a rope from his saddle and pulled the bucket into place, securing it as best he could. Then he tied Oats's reins to the wagon

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and climbed up next to the woman. "That's a little better. Let me see if I can get these horses moving now."

"Thank you," she said, gladly handing over the reins. "I'm Elana, Pancho's wife."

"Ben Snow. I need a job and I'm hoping your husband will take me on."

"The people pay to see him fly. We lead a precarious existence." She sounded more educated than her husband did and he wondered how they'd ever gotten together. "But I'm sure he'll pay you for helping me tonight, at least."

"Will he fly tomorrow?"

"If the winds are not too strong."

Pancho Quizas was waiting when the wagon pulled up. "You are a good man, Ben Snow," he ventured after Elana told him how their cargo almost came loose. "Help me fly tomorrow and I will pay you ten silver dollars."

"Fair enough."

Ben finished the evening in the poker game, his confidence renewed, and won sixteen dollars.

The hot, calm morning seemed perfect for Pancho's balloon ascent. "I will go up at two this afternoon," he announced, "at the Mission San Agustin."

A crowd of townspeople came out to watch, and Elana dutifully collected a small fee from each one. They stood in front of the mission church, a few miles outside the city, paying little attention to the dust devils—harmless whirlwinds of air made visible by the dust and sand they raised from the ground. Ben had seen them many times before in dry regions, especially when the temperature was high and the wind was calm, and he knew that some superstitious people viewed them as the devil come to collect the souls of the dead.

Ben worked with Pancho, positioning the basket, laying out the balloon, and igniting the brazier of wood and coal used to inflate it. Through the thick cloth fabric Ben noticed a shape approaching them. It proved to be an elderly priest who'd come out of the mission church to observe their progress. "I am Padre Paul," he told them. "Do you plan an ascent this afternoon?"

"I do, Padre," Pancho Quizas told him. "It is a perfect day."

"The Lord's day," the priest replied. "And you have brought dust devils with you."

"Have no fear, Padre," Pancho told him with a grin, and his gold tooth caught the afternoon sun. "We will rise above them."

The old priest turned his weathered face toward the clear blue sky. "Sometimes one cannot go high enough to escape the devil."

As the balloon began to inflate, almost covering the basket, its

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colorful design became visible to the spectators. Some Indians from a nearby reservation moved forward for a closer look, attracted by the Apache and Navajo symbols that formed a border around a design of Mexican and American flags. In the very center, Ben noticed, was an advertisement for a Mexican beer.

"Did you paint this?" Ben asked. "It's very good."

"No, no! Elana is the artist."

She came forward then, smiling as her work of art grew taller before their eyes. Then Pancho climbed into the wicker basket suspended beneath the air bag and signaled for Ben and Elana to free it from its moorings. As it rose into the afternoon sky another dust devil appeared, seeming to give chase.

"A bad sign," the old priest murmured.

But the crowd let out a cheer, and Ben saw Pancho's balloon rising straight up. "How will he get down?" he asked Elana.

"As the hot air cools the balloon will gradually sink back to earth. He'll only be up for five or ten minutes. If it comes down too fast, he can release one or two of those sandbags on the side to lighten the load."

The colorful balloon went up perhaps a hundred feet, easily clearing the top of the mission's twin bell towers. Ben felt a movement behind him and turned to see Scooter Colt, the gunslinger from last night's poker game, his right hand resting on the butt of his gun. Ben's own weapon had been left in Elana's wagon, and for an instant he wished it were closer at hand.

"He's coming down!" someone from the crowd shouted after a few minutes, and indeed the balloon was starting its descent. It drifted off to the north, beyond the church, and the spectators broke into a run to catch sight of its landing.

Ben was in the midst of the crowd, well behind the leaders, when he rounded the corner of the church and saw at once that something was wrong. His first thought was that Pancho had landed badly, injuring himself, but it was more than that. Old Jud Withers was the first to raise his voice and spread the improbable news. "He's not here!" he shouted. "Pancho Quizas is gone!"

He must have fallen out of the balloon's basket as it descended. There could be no other explanation. And yet, as Ben and the others scanned the landscape, they could detect no sign of him. There were no hiding places on the flat desert terrain, only a few small cactuses incapable of giving shelter to a child, much less a grown man. The balloon had come down about thirty yards from the rear of the mission, and Ben's first thought was that Pancho had made it unseen to the back entrance. It seemed unlikely, given the distance, but he hurried over to try the door. It was firmly locked.

"A man doesn't just disappear," Ben argued.

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"Perhaps the dust devils have taken his soul," the priest said.

"Then where is his body?"

The wicker basket had landed on its side, overturning the brazier. Nothing else was there except the ropes used to anchor the balloon to the ground. Ben noticed that none of the sandbags had been cut free to slow the descent. It was as if Pancho had wanted to return to earth as quickly as possible. The multicolored airbag, settled in a heap beside the basket, was still exhaling air as it flattened out.

"You tell me where he is," Jud Withers demanded of Ben. "You were working for him, weren't you?"

"I think we'd better ask his wife," Ben suggested, seeing Elana hurrying toward them.

"What's happened to Pancho?" she asked. "Is he hurt?"

"He's disappeared," Ben told her.

"Disappeared?" She looked around, as if expecting him to pop out of the ground at any moment. "How could that be?"

"We don't know. Did it ever happen before?"

"Of course not!" She ran over to the wicker basket, righting it as she searched beneath and around it for clues. She lifted a corner of the balloon and peered underneath. Finally she just stood and stared at the sky, as if waiting for him to come down.

That was when Scooter Colt walked up to join them. "You think he's still up there, lady? We can find out quick enough!" He drew his six-gun, pointed it at the sky, and started shooting.

Ben counted six shots before Scooter toppled over backwards, as if from the recoil of his own weapon. Old Jud Withers was the first to reach the body. "God Almighty! He's been shot! Drilled right through the eye."

And that was how Scooter Colt died, in a gunfight with the sky, or with the spirit of Pancho Quizas, who was still floating around up there. Edgar Blaise, the cotton farmer, was the first to scoff at the idea. "How fast a draw is a dead man?" he wanted to know.

"You haven't found Quizas's body yet," Gert reminded them. "You don't even know that he's dead."

But the area behind the mission, and the church itself, had been carefully searched and there was no trace of the Mexican balloonist. Elana drove the wagon around and started gathering up the deflated balloon. Ben went over to help her load the wicker basket onto the wagon along with the balloon, though he knew there was little chance now of payment for his work. "Perhaps you could sell this equipment," he told her.

"Not yet. He may return. I have faith in the Lord."

They'd roused Tucson's sheriff from somewhere, and he arrived

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on horseback to look at Scooter Colt's body. "Who shot him?" he asked.

"Don't know," Withers replied. "We were all here but we didn't see who fired the shot."

The sheriff, whose name was Morton, seemed annoyed at being disturbed on a Sunday afternoon. "Can't you handle this, Padre?" he called out to the mission priest. "This is your day, not mine."

"I can bury him," Padre Paul replied. "That is all."

"All right." Sheriff Morton could see some sort of investigation was necessary. "Who all is carrying a gun?"

"No one but the dead man," Withers said.

"I have a gunbelt in the wagon," Ben volunteered, "but I wasn't wearing it."

"Let's see it," the sheriff said, examining the dead man's gun. "There are five shots fired from this one."

"I counted six," Ben told him. "One must have been the shot that killed him." He brought his gun from the wagon to show Sheriff Morton it was fully loaded.

Padre Paul cleared his throat. "There were dust devils in the air at the time, Sheriff. They seemed to rise up with his balloon."

"You're telling me he went up but he didn't come down?"

"That's right," Ben agreed. "When we couldn't find him, Scooter said he must still be up there. He drew his pistol and started firing at the sky."

"And the sky fired back," another voice said. It was young Gert. She had her guitar slung over one shoulder and she plucked at the strings as she sang:

"Scooter was his name, it wasn't Tex,
He came here lookin' for that old Mex.
He fired his gun right at the sky,
The sky fired back 'cause it ain't shy.
Now Scooter is dead and that's a shame,
No one here will remember his name."

She finished the song with the lyrics barely audible. No one applauded because that didn't seem right. When she headed back to her wagon, only Ben followed.

Later, at Custer's Café, he asked her, "What did your song mean?"

"I made it up. Does it need a meaning?" She picked up her guitar and started to strum it.

"The second line: *He came here lookin' for that old Mex.* What does it mean?"

"Just what it says, I guess." Her face was as stony as it had been during the poker game.

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"Are you saying that Scooter Colt came to Tucson to kill Pancho Quizas?"

She shrugged. "I guess so. When he came here from Texas a few weeks back he was askin' questions about Pancho. Did any of us know him? Had he been flyin' his balloon around here?"

"What did you tell him?"

"Sure, we'd heard of Pancho and his balloon. Everyone in these parts had heard of him. He usually came through here in September. I guess Scooter decided to wait for him."

"What made you think he wanted to kill Pancho?"

"Well, he kept wearin' that gunbelt in a city where hardly anyone else does. He was expectin' he'd need it."

Ben pondered that. "Where had he been staying, these past few weeks?"

"Out at Edgar Blaise's cotton farm," Gert answered. "He was working there."

In the morning, Ben rode out to the Blaise place and found the farmer weighing bags of freshly picked cotton. He was dressed like one of his workmen, and bore little resemblance to the natty gentleman who'd shared the poker table with Ben Saturday night. "Looking for work?" he asked as Ben dismounted.

"I might be, but not today. I wanted to ask you about Scooter Colt. He was working for you, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, for a few weeks. I always need extra people at harvest time."

"I've been in the Arizona territory before but I never knew you grew cotton around here. Did settlers bring the plants from Texas?"

"Could be. More likely it came up from Mexico. They say the Indians there have been raising cotton for centuries." He hoisted the bag off the scale and handed it over to a workman, making some jottings on a pad. "What do you want to know about Scooter?"

"Some say he was looking for Pancho Quizas so he could kill him."

"I guess there was bad blood between them, all right. Did you catch the look on Scooter's face when Pancho walked into Custer's Café the other night?"

"I missed that," Ben admitted.

"Scooter told me one night that Quizas cheated him on a business deal involving some Mexican horses. He'd paid the Mex some money and the horses were never delivered. Quizas claimed the Texas Rangers intercepted the horses at the border, but Scooter suspected he'd sold them to somebody else and kept the money from both transactions."

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"I thought Pancho was strictly a showman, traveling around with his balloon."

"He and his wife couldn't live on that, not even by selling advertising space on their balloon."

"Did you ever hear Scooter say he wanted to kill Pancho?"

"He said the next time they met it would be his six-gun did the talking."

Ben nodded, watching Blaise lift another bag of cotton onto the scale. "What do you think happened to Pancho yesterday?"

The cotton farmer shrugged. "Padre Paul thinks the dust devils got him. I'm more of a practical sort. I don't think Pancho was ever in that balloon. He let it go up and come down without him. He was hiding in the crowd somewhere and when Scooter started shooting he shot back."

"He was in the balloon's basket when it went up," Ben insisted. "I was right there, releasing the moorings."

"Then somebody else shot Scooter, maybe Pancho's wife."

Ben couldn't remember where any of them had been at the moment of Scooter's death, but he was pretty sure no one was facing Scooter when he fired at the sky. *The sky fired back,* Gert had sung. Maybe it had. "Did anyone else have a motive for wanting Scooter dead?"

"He told me last week he pulled Jud Withers's daughter into the stable one night and she told him if he ever tried that again she'd shoot him, but that was just talk."

"Jud has a daughter?"

"Sure. Gert Withers, the one who plays the guitar and sings. Her mother's dead; Jud is her father."

When Ben rode back into town that afternoon, Gert was nowhere in sight. Jud Withers was at the bar in Custer's Café, as usual, describing Sunday's strange shooting to anyone who hadn't yet heard about it. When he took time out to order a beer, Ben slipped in next to him. "You never told me Gert was your daughter."

"Never asked me, did you?"

"If Scooter was bothering her, that might have been reason enough for a father to shoot him."

"Gert fights her own battles. She doesn't need my help."

"Has Pancho's body turned up yet?"

Withers shook his head. "Padre Paul says he went straight to heaven, says it was a miracle."

"It might have been. Has Elana left with the wagon yet?"

"She needs the sheriff to say it's all right. He'll probably let her go soon unless Pancho's body turns up."

There was only one place to go after that. Ben rode out to the San Agustin Mission once more. Padre Paul was talking to some

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Mexican women out front, enjoying the cooling breeze on a warm day. "It's Ben Snow, isn't it?" he asked as Ben dismounted and led Oats up to the group.

"That's right, Padre. We're still baffled by what happened yesterday."

"You mean the miracle?"

"Well, yes." He glanced skyward. "I was wondering if I might go up in one of your bell towers to get a better view of the land."

"Certainly. I'll take you up there."

Ben followed the priest into the church, which was filled with the glow of votive candles. "This building is one hundred and sixteen years old," he announced proudly, "and the mission itself has been on this location even longer. You can see the grime on the walls from all these candles the faithful have lit over the past century."

He unlocked a small door to the right of the entrance and led the way up a winding stairway to the bell tower. The view was spectacular, with the flat land stretching to the distant mountains, broken only by a few low trees and stately cactuses. But Ben realized at once that from this angle the rear of the church probably would have obscured the spot where the balloon came down.

Padre Paul seemed to read his disappointment. "You were thinking that Scooter Colt might have been shot from this bell tower."

"The thought crossed my mind. He was looking toward the sky when he fired his pistol."

"No one was up here, not Pancho Quizas nor anyone else."

"Where were you, Padre?"

"On the ground with the rest of you."

"Then you can't be certain no one was up here."

"The doors to this tower and the other one are kept locked at all times. There were too many instances of children climbing up here."

They went back downstairs and Padre Paul locked the tower door behind them. Ben left the mission and rode away with a wave of his hand.

He went back into Tucson to the sheriff's office and found Elana there, getting ready to leave. Her wagon was already stowed with Pancho's balloon and other gear. Ben offered to accompany her back across the border but she declined. "I have an uncle there who will meet me," she said. "Thank you for your kindness." She gave him the ten dollars he'd been promised.

"Someone told me Scooter Colt was looking for Pancho because of a horse-trading deal that went bad."

"I don't know anything about that. I doubt if my husband even knew the man."

There was little more to say. "I hope we'll meet again under better

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circumstances," he told her with a tip of his Stetson. Then he went inside to see the sheriff.

"Nice woman," Sheriff Morton said, lighting up a Mexican cigar. "Can't figure out what happened to her husband."

"Or who killed Scooter Colt."

"Or that either," the sheriff admitted.

"Have you examined the body?"

"I guess the undertaker examined him more than I did."

"I was wondering about the angle of the bullet. Could he have been shot from above, while he was looking at the sky?"

"No, the undertaker tells me it looks like he was shot from below. But that doesn't mean anything since they all say he was looking up when the bullet hit him. Somebody in the crowd just got off a lucky shot and nobody saw who did it. We'll probably never know."

"Did he have enemies?"

"Let's put it this way. Scooter Colt made mighty few friends in the short time he was here. Wearing that gun in town turned folks off right away." His eyes flickered on Ben's own holstered revolver. "We're moving into the twentieth century here."

"So I've heard."

"You going to be around long?"

"Not too long. I think I'll be riding on soon."

Ben ate supper at Custer's Café and listened for a time to Gert Withers's songs. Her father was starting another poker game up front and asked Ben to sit in, but he declined. It was getting dark when he mounted Oats and headed south out of Tucson. He knew that if he rode fast he'd be able to overtake Elana's wagon before it reached the border.

He saw the lanterns first, just after sundown along the road to Nogales. Elana seemed surprised to see him and reined up the horses as he drew abreast of her. "What is it?" she asked. "What do you want?"

"I've come for Scooter Colt's killer," Ben told her.

"And you think that I did it?"

"I know you didn't do it. Pancho Quizas is alive and well and hiding in your wagon. He killed Scooter Colt."

The collapsed balloon rose up then, and there was Pancho beneath it, pointing a deadly little derringer at Ben's head. "If I have to kill you, I will," he said.

"Before you pull that trigger, aren't you curious as to how I knew?"

"Mildly," the balloonist admitted. "What mistake did I make?"

"No mistake. Even Padre Paul thinks you were whisked away by a dust devil. But I was seeking a more natural explanation for

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your disappearance. You had to be in that basket when the balloon took off because I saw you myself from just a few feet away. You couldn't have jumped or fallen from it without people seeing you. Therefore, barring the supernatural, you had to have been in it when it landed."

"The basket was empty."

"But not the balloon itself," Ben told him. "It hung down almost over that wicker basket when it was inflated. As the air cooled and the balloon began its descent, you must have seen Scooter Colt on the ground waiting for you, his hand on the butt of his gun. There was only one place to hide. Obscured by the balloon's own deflation, you hoisted yourself inside it, until you were completely hidden from view as it landed. It must have been a bumpy landing but you froze there on the ground, letting the fabric of the balloon settle down around you."

"He was going to kill me," Pancho said. "I knew he was. I had to hide somewhere."

"So when he started firing into the air you feared he might shoot at the deflated balloon too. As I noticed earlier, shapes could be seen even through the thick cloth of the air bag. You saw him shooting, and you fired one shot through the balloon with your little derringer."

"You knew I was armed?"

"I didn't see a weapon, but I considered the possibility you might carry a derringer under your coat. The sheriff told me the bullet seemed to come from below, and I figured you were the only one who could have done it. Shooting like that from inside the air bag, no one saw the muzzle flash of your gun. Elana must have known you were hiding there when she went to load the balloon onto her wagon, but once again all that deflated cloth hid your movements until you were on the wagon."

"I didn't mean to kill him. I only wanted to wound him before he shot me."

"It was this business with the horses?"

He nodded. "Scooter wanted me to steal them and run them across the border. When I refused, he said I'd double-crossed him."

Ben realized Pancho was still holding the derringer on him. "Put away that gun," he said. "I'm not going to turn you in."

"Thank you," Elana said. He could see she was relieved.

"Where will you go, now that you no longer exist?"

Pancho Quizas smiled, revealing his gold tooth one more time. "A new identity is easy to find in Mexico."

Ben turned to ride off. "Remember to sew up the bullet hole in your balloon before you fly again."

Some time later he heard there were still songs and legends about the San Agustin miracle, but he never told anyone the true story. ●

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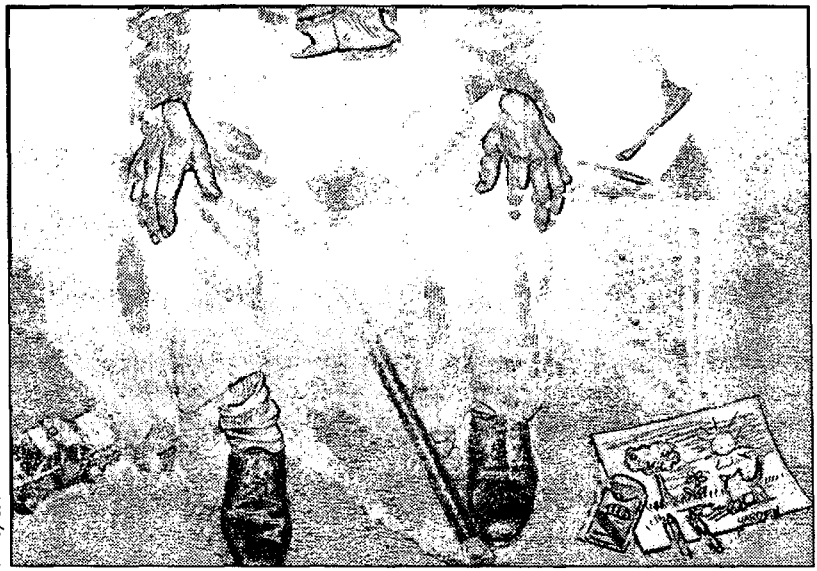

Art by Laurie Harden

WALTER'S LEG

by Ruth Rendell

While he was telling the story about his mother taking him to the barber's, the pain in Walter's leg started again. A shooting pain—appropriate, that—and he knew very well what caused it. He shifted Andrew onto his other knee.

The story was about how his mother and he, on the way to get his hair cut, stopped on the corner of the High Street and Green Lanes to talk to a friend who had just come out of the fishmonger's. His mother was a talkative lady who enjoyed a gossip. The friend was like-minded. They took very little notice of Walter. He disengaged his hand from his mother's, walked off on his own down Green Lanes and into Church Road, found the barber's, produced sixpence from his pocket, and had his hair cut. After that he walked back the way he had come. His mother and the friend were still talking. The five-year-old Walter slipped his little hand into his mother's and she looked down and smiled at him. His absence had gone unnoticed.

Emma and Andrew marvelled at this story. They had heard it before but they still marvelled. The world had changed so much,

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even they knew that at six and four. They were not even allowed to stand outside on the pavement on their own for two minutes, let alone go anywhere unaccompanied. "Tell another," said Emma.

As she spoke, a sharp twinge ran up Walter's calf to the knee and pinched his thigh muscle. He reached down and rubbed his bony old leg.

"Shall I tell you how Moultry shot me?"

"Shot you?" said Andrew. "With a gun?"

"With an air gun. It was a long time ago."

"Everything that's happened to you, Grandad," said Emma, "was a long time ago."

"Very true, my sweetheart. This was sixty-five years ago. I was seven."

"So it wasn't as long ago as when you had your haircut," said Emma, who already showed promise as an arithmetician.

Walter laughed. "Moultry was a boy I knew. He lived down our road. We used to play down by the river, a whole bunch of us. There were fish in the river then but I don't think any of us were fishing that day. We'd been climbing trees. You could get across the river by climbing willow trees, the branches stretched right across.

"And then one of us saw a kingfisher, a little tiny bright-blue bird it was, the colour of a peacock, and Moultry said he was going to shoot it. I knew that would be wrong, even then I knew. Maybe we all did except Moultry. He had an air gun, he showed it to us. I clapped my hands and the kingfisher flew away. All the birds went, we'd frightened them away with all the racket we were making. I had a friend called William Robbins, we called him Bill, he was my best friend, and he said to Moultry that he'd bet he couldn't shoot anything, not aim at it and shoot it. Well, Moultry wasn't having that and he said, yes, he could. He pointed to a stone sticking up out of the water and said he'd hit that. He didn't, though. He shot me."

"Wow," said Andrew.

"But he didn't mean to, Grandad," said Emma. "He didn't do it on purpose."

"No, I don't suppose he did, but it hurt all the same. The shot

"No one writes with more devastating accuracy about the world we live and commit sin in today," said novelist John Mortimer of Ruth Rendell. The L. A. *Times* says: "Rendell writes with such elegance and restraint, with such a literate voice and an insightful mind, that she . . . achieves something almost sublime." Imagine how delighted we are to present new tales by this master novelist and short story writer in each of the next several issues.

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went into my leg, into the calf, just below my right knee. Bill Robbins went off to my house, he ran as fast as he could, he was a very good runner, the best in the school, and he fetched my dad and my dad took me to the doctor."

"And did the doctor dig the bullet out?"

"A pellet, not a bullet. No, he didn't dig it out." Walter rubbed his leg, just below the right knee. "As a matter of fact, it's still there."

"It's still *there?*"

Emma got off the arm of the chair and Andrew got off Walter's lap and both children stood contemplating his right leg in its grey flannel trouser leg and grey and white Argyle-pattern sock. Walter pulled up the trouser leg to the knee. There was nothing to be seen.

"If you like," said Walter, "I'll show you a photograph of the inside of my leg next time you come to my house."

The suggestion was greeted with rapture. They wanted "next time" to be now, but were told by their mother that they would have to wait till Thursday. Walter was glad he'd come in the car. He wouldn't have fancied walking home, not with this pain. Perhaps he'd better go back to his GP, get a second opinion, ask to be sent to a—what would it be called?—an orthopaedic surgeon, presumably. Andrew, surely, had had the right idea when he asked if the doctor had dug the pellet out of his leg. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, thought old-fashioned Walter, hast thou ordained strength. It was hard to understand why the doctor hadn't dug it out sixty-five years ago, but in those days, so long as something wasn't life-threatening, they tended to leave well—or ill—alone. Ten years ago the specialist merely said he doubted if it was the pellet causing the pain, it was more likely arthritis. Walter must accept that he wasn't as young as he used to be.

Back home, searching through his desk drawers for the X-rays, Walter thought about something else Andrew had said. No, not Andrew, Emma. She'd said Moultry hadn't done it on purpose and he'd said he didn't suppose he had. Now he wasn't so sure. For the first time in sixty-five years he recreated in his mind the expression on Moultry's face that summer's evening when he boasted he could hit the stone.

Bill Robbins was sitting on the riverbank, two other boys whose names he had forgotten were up in the willow tree, while he, Walter, was down by the water's edge, looking up at the kingfisher, and Moultry was higher up with his air gun. The sun had been low in a pale blue July sky. Walter had clapped his hands then and when the kingfisher flew away, turned his head to look at Moultry. And Moultry's expression had been resentful, and revengeful, too, because Walter had scared the bird away. That was when he started boasting about hitting the stone. So perhaps he had meant

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to shoot him, shot him in the leg because he'd been baulked of his desire. I didn't think of that at the time, though, Walter thought. I took it for an accident and so did everyone else.

"I'm imagining things," he said aloud, and he laid the X-rays on top of the desk, ready to show them to Emma and Andrew. Their mother brought the children along after school on Thursday. The pictures were admired, and a repetition of the story demanded. In telling it, Walter said nothing about the revengeful look on Moultry's face.

"You forgot the bit about Bill running to your house and being the best runner in the school," said Emma.

"So I did, but now you've put it in yourself."

"What was his other name, Grandad? Moultry what?"

"It must have been a case of what Moultry," said Walter and he thought, as he often did, of how times had changed. It would be incomprehensible to these children that one might have known someone only by his surname. "I don't know what he was called. I can't remember."

The children suggested names. In his childhood the ones they knew would have been unheard-of (Scott, Ross, Damian, Liam, Seth) or, strangely enough, too old-fashioned for popular use (Joshua, Simon, Jack, George). He put up some ideas himself, appropriate names for the time (Kenneth, Robert, Alan, Ronald) but none of them was right. He'd know Moultry's name when he heard it.

His daughter Barbara was looking at the X-rays. "You'll have to go back to the doctor with that leg, Dad."

"It does give me jip." Walter realised he'd used an expression that was out-of-date even when he was a boy. It was a favourite of his own father's. "It does give me jip," he said again.

"See if they can find you a different consultant. They must be able to do something."

When Barbara and the children had gone, he looked Moultry up in the phone book. The chances were that Moultry wouldn't be there, not in the same place after sixty-five years, and he wasn't. No Moultrys were in it. Walter's leg began to ache dreadfully. He tried massaging it with some stuff he'd bought when he'd pulled a muscle in his back. It heated the skin but did nothing for the pain. He tried to remember Moultry's first name. It wasn't Henry, was it? No, Henry was old-fashioned in the twenties and not revived till the eighties. David? It was a possibility, but Moultry hadn't been called David.

Bill Robbins had known Moultry a lot better than he had. The Moultrys and the Robbinses had lived next-door but one to each other. Bill was dead, he'd died ten years before, but up until his death he and Walter had remained friends, played golf together,

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been fellow members of the Rotary Club, and Walter still kept in touch with Bill's son. He phoned John Robbins.

"How are you, Walter?"

"I'm fine but for a spot of arthritis in my leg."

"We're none of us getting any younger." This was generous from a man of forty-two.

"Tell me something. D'you remember those people called Moultry who lived near your grandparents?"

"Vaguely. My gran would."

"She's still alive?"

"She's only ninety-six, Walter. That's nothing in our family, barring my poor dad."

John Robbins said it would be nice to see him and to come over for a meal, and Walter said thanks very much, he'd like to. Old Mrs. Robbins was in the phone book, in the same house she'd lived in since she got married seventy-three years before. She answered the phone in a brisk, spry voice. Certainly she remembered the Moultrys, though they'd been gone since 1968, and she particularly remembered the boy with his air gun. He'd taken a potshot at her cat, but he'd missed.

"Lucky for the cat." Walter rubbed his leg.

"Lucky for Harold," said Mrs. Robbins grimly.

"That was his name, Harold," said Walter.

"Of course it was. Harold Moultry. He disappeared in the war."

"Disappeared?"

"I mean he never came back here, and I wasn't sorry. He was in the army, never saw active service, of course not. He was in a camp down in the west country somewhere for the duration, took up with a farmer's daughter, married her and stopped there. I reckon he thought he'd come in for the farm and maybe he has. Why don't you ever come and see me, Walter? You come over for a meal and I'll cook you steak and chips, you were always partial to that."

Walter said he would once he'd had his leg seen to. He got an appointment with an orthopaedic surgeon, a different one, who looked at the new X-rays and said Walter had arthritis. *Everyone* of Walter's age had arthritis somewhere. The children liked the new X-rays and Emma said they were an improvement on the old ones. Andrew asked for one of them to put on his bedroom wall along with a magazine cut-out of the Spice Girls and his Lion King poster.

"You ought to get a second opinion on that leg, Dad," said Barbara.

"It would be a third opinion by now, wouldn't it?"

"Tell about Moultry, Grandad," said Andrew.

So Walter told it all over again, this time adding Moultry's

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Christian name. "Harold Moultry pointed at a stone in the water and said he'd shoot that, but he shot me."

"And Bill Robbins who was the fastest runner in the whole school ran to your house and fetched your dad," said Emma. "But Harold didn't mean to do it, he didn't mean to hurt you, did he?"

"Who knows?" said Walter. "It was a long time ago."

They were all going away on holiday together, Barbara and her husband Ian and the children and Walter. It was a custom they'd established after Walter's wife died five years before. If he'd been completely honest, he'd have preferred not to go. He didn't much like the seaside or the food in the hotel, and he was embarrassed about exposing his skinny old body in the swimming pool. And he suspected that if they were completely honest—perhaps they were, secretly, when alone together—Barbara and Ian would have preferred not to have him with them. The children liked him there, he was pretty sure of that, and that was why he went.

The night before they left he went round to old Mrs. Robbins's. John was there, and John's wife, and they all had steak and chips and tiramisu, which Mrs. Robbins had become addicted to in extreme old age. They all asked about Walter's leg and he had to tell them nothing could be done. A discussion followed on how different things would be these days if a child of seven had been shot in the leg by another child. It would have got into the papers, and Walter would have had counselling. Moultry would have had counselling too, probably.

Driving down to Sidmouth with Emma beside him, trying to keep in convoy with Ian and Barbara and Andrew in the car ahead, Walter asked himself if Moultry had ever said he was sorry. He hadn't. There had been no opportunity, for Walter was sure he'd never seen Moultry again. Suddenly he thought of something. Ever since the pain in his leg started he'd thought about Moultry every single day. He was becoming obessed with Moultry.

"I'm bored, Grandad," said Emma. "Tell me a story."

Not Moultry. Not the visit to the barber, which for some reason reminded him of Moultry. "I'll tell you about our dog Pip, who stole a string of sausages from the butcher's and once bit the postman's hand when he put it through the letter box."

Another world it was. Sausages no longer came in strings, and supermarkets were more common than butchers. These days the postman would have had counselling and a tetanus injection and Pip would have been threatened with destruction, only his parents would have fought the magistrates' decision and taken it to the High Court, and Pip's picture would have been in the papers. Walter was tired by the time they got to Sidmouth, while Emma was as fresh as a daisy and raring to go. He had related the entire

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history of his childhood to her, or as much as he could recall, several times over.

His leg ached. He still thought exercise better for him than rest. While the others went down to the beach, he took a walk along the seafront and through streets of Georgian houses. He hardly knew what made him glance at the brass plate on one of the pillars flanking a front door, perhaps the brilliant polish on it caught the sun, but he did look and there he read: Jenkins, Moultry, Hall, *Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths*. It couldn't be his Moultry, could it? Harold Moultry as a solicitor was a laughable thought.

After dinner and a drink in the bar he went early to his room. Leave the young ones alone for a bit. He looked for a telephone directory and finally found one inside the wardrobe behind a spare blanket. Jenkins, Moultry, Hall were there and so was Moultry, A.P. at an address in the town. Under this appeared: Moultry, H., Mingle Valley Farm, Harcombe. That was him all right. That was Harold Moultry. The solicitor with the initials A.P. would be his son. Why don't I phone him, thought Walter, lying in bed, conjuring up pictures in the dark, why don't I phone him in the morning and ask him over for a drink? Meeting him will take him off my mind. I bet if I had counselling I'd be told to meet him. Confront him, that would be the word.

An answering machine was what he got. Of course the voice wasn't recognisable. Not after all these years. It didn't say it was Harold Moultry but that this was the Moultry Jersey Herd and to leave a message after the tone. Walter tried again at midday and again at two. After that they all went to Lyme Regis and he had to leave it.

When he got back he expected the message light on his phone to be on, but there was nothing. And nothing next day. Moultry had chosen not to get in touch. Briefly, Walter thought of phoning the son, the solicitor, but dismissed the idea. If Moultry didn't want to see him, he certainly didn't want to see Moultry. That evening Walter sat with the children while Ian and Barbara went out to dinner, and on the following afternoon, because it was raining, they all went to the cinema and saw *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

On these holidays Walter always behaved as tactfully as he could, doing his share of looking after the children and sometimes more than his share, but also taking care not to be intrusive. So it was his policy, on at least one occasion, to take himself off for the day. This time he had arranged to visit a cousin who lived in Honiton. Hearing he was coming to Sidmouth, the cousin had invited him to lunch.

On the way back, approaching Sidbury, he noticed a sign to Harcombe. Why did that ring a bell? Of course. Harcombe was where

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Moultry lived, he and his Jersey herd. Walter had taken the Harcombe turning almost before he knew what he was doing. In the circumstances, it would be ridiculous to be so near and not go to Mingle Valley Farm, an omission he might regret for the rest of his life.

Beautiful countryside, green woods, dark red earth where the harvested fields had already been ploughed, a sparkling river that splashed over stones. He saw the cattle before he saw the house: cream-coloured elegant beasts, bony and mournful-eyed, hock-deep in the lush grass. Hundreds of them—well, scores. If he said "scores" to Emma and Andrew they wouldn't know what he was talking about. On a gatepost, lettered in black on a white board, he read: *Mingle Valley Farm, the Moultry Jersey Herd* and under that, *Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.*

He left the car. Beyond the gate was only a path, winding away between flowery grass verges and tall trees. A pheasant made him jump, uttering its harsh rattling cry and taking off on clumsy wings. The path took a turn to the left, the woodland ended abruptly, and there ahead of him stretched lawns and beyond them, the house. It was a sprawling, half-timbered place, very picturesque, with diamond-paned windows. On the lawn, rabbits cropped the grass.

He had counted fifteen rabbits when a man came out from behind the house. Even from this distance Walter could tell he was an old man. He could see too that this old man was carrying a gun. Six decades fell away and instead of a green Devon lawn, Walter saw a sluggish river on the outskirts of London, willow trees, a kingfisher. He did as he had done then and clapped his hands.

The rabbits scattered. Walter heard the sharp crack of the shotgun, expected to see a rabbit fall but fell himself instead. Rolled over as pain stabbed his leg. It was his left leg this time, but the pain was much the same as it had been when he was seven. He sat up, groaning, blood all over his trousers. A man was standing over him with a mobile phone in one hand and the gun bent over in the middle—broken, did they call it?—in the other. Walter would have known that resentful glare anywhere, even after sixty-five years.

In the hospital they took the shot out and for good measure—"might as well while you're in here"—extracted the pellet from his right leg. With luck, the doctor said, he'd be as good as new.

"Remember we're none of us getting any younger."

"Really?" said Walter. "I thought I was."

Moultry didn't come to see him in hospital. He told Barbara her father was lucky not to have been prosecuted for trespass. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

RAINEY'S WAY

by Clark Howard

Rainey had just opened the poolroom a few minutes earlier, and Sugar had come in, as usual, to talk to him about finding Roy Britt. Rainey had made coffee for both of them, and they were talking—and that was when the young Marine walked in.

He was in khakis with razor-sharp creases and corporal chevrons on the sleeves, and a single row of combat ribbons above the left pocket of his shirt, with a Purple Heart ribbon pinned above the single row. His light brown hair was trimmed short, in the Marine Corps way, and his pale blue eyes were direct and without much warmth. A three-inch scar ran across his cheek under the left eye, somehow making that eye even less warm. He had the look of a young man that someone with good street smarts would never mess with.

"Hey, Rainey," he said quietly to the old black man who ran the poolroom. He did not look at Sugar, but she looked at him, curiously, because there weren't many men who didn't look at her, the way she was built, slim and slung, with a body that no matter how

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still she stood always looked as inviting as if she were lap dancing. So it was a surprise to her that this unsmiling young Marine didn't pay any attention to her.

"Does Ah know you?" Rainey asked, squinting, straining his old, old mind for a fragment of memory.

"Used to," said the young man. "I'm McCulla's kid, remember? I left something with you a few years ago. A clarinet. It used to belong to my daddy."

Old Rainey's eyes got wide and his mouth dropped open and he said in wonder, "Well, Ah'll *be!* Lawd, Lawd, Lawd, jes' look at you! McCulla's kid! Why, you done growed up, boy!"

Although Clark Howard is not known as a writer of series stories, he does sometimes pick up characters he's used before, mixing them, often as subsidiary characters, into a new tale. This latest piece is even more ambitious than that. In it Mr. Howard picks up all the important characters and storylines from three of his best tales: 6/2/80's Edgar winning "Horn Man"; 9/85's "McCulla's Kid"; and 12/94's "Split Decision." If you've got some old copies, read them all!

"I did that, sure enough," said the young man. His words had a deeper meaning than just years passing.

"What you doin' back in N'Orleans, boy?" Rainey asked.

The younger man shrugged. "Just got out of the service. Thought I'd come get my daddy's clarinet and see if I can still remember how to play it. Might try to get a job in a band if I can."

"Well, good for you," Rainey said, smiling, genuinely pleased. "Yo' daddy be mighty proud if you did. De music was his whole life, you know."

McCulla's kid said nothing. Not quite his whole life, he thought. There was also the gin and the cards and the dice, and the women he used to get through the terrible shroud of loneliness that tortured him after Edie, his wife, the kid's mother, had died so obscenely early in life from a brain tumor. But Rainey was close to being right, because it *was* the music that had kept Lew McCulla going, given him the energy to keep playing clarinet long enough to make it into the Jazz Hall of Fame.

That had been just before the kid killed him one night to put him out of his misery.

"There's another reason I came back, too," the young man said, and Rainey noticed that his pale blue eyes turned cold as agates. "I want to find out who the two men were who left my daddy in the alley that night."

"Oh, now, boy," Rainey began shaking his head, "you don't want to be messin' yo' life up wif' stuff like that, happened so long ago—"

"If you don't want to help me, I can find somebody who will," the

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young man said quietly. "There's always ways to find out things in the *Vieux Carre.*"

The *Vieux Carre* was the French Quarter of New Orleans, and Rainey knew, as did the girl, Sugar, who was listening with fascination, that McCulla's kid was right: the *Vieux Carre* held many secrets—but none of them were sacred; they all had a price. The best thing Rainey could do right now, he knew, was to keep the kid from announcing to the whole Quarter that he was after the men who had precipitated his father's death. Rainey needed time to figure out what to do.

"All right, boy, Ah'll he'p you," the older man said. "But you gots to do it my way, see, Rainey's way. I needs to ax around; dem two was from out of town, you know."

"Yeah. Kansas City. They worked for Calder Lingle."

"Tha's right. So give me a few days, hear? Whar' you stayin' at?"

"No place yet. My sea bag's in a locker at the bus station. I thought I'd look around for a room."

"Sugar," Rainey said to the girl, "take him over to whar' you and yo' mama live. See if they's any vacancies."

"There are," Sugar said. "There's *always* vacancies in that trap."

"Go on wif' Sugar," Rainey said. "Pick up yo' bag on de way. Ah'll start checkin' round. An' Ah'll get yo' clarinet, too. It's in Mr. Gaston's safe over at Tradition Hall. Drop by tomorrow."

"Okay. Thanks, Rainey."

McCulla's kid followed Sugar out of the poolroom.

They made an incongruous pair as they walked down the street together: he with his Irish face and light hair, perfect posture, khakis still creased even after a bus ride, shoes spit-shined, taking regulation thirty-inch steps; she wearing snug jeans and a New Orleans Saints T-shirt that nicely outlined her wide, angular shoulders, trim waist, and buoyant young breasts, her café au lait skin looking cool even in the already warm morning sun, short, tightly curled black hair fitting her head like a skull cap, her walk loose but somehow as confident as his.

"What's your name?"she asked. "Rainey didn't say."

"I'm not sure Rainey even knows," he said.

Sugar grunted derisively. "Bet me. Rainey knows *everything.*" They walked on a few more steps, then she said, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What's your name, dummy?" Sugar rolled her eyes upwards, something she did when her naturally short supply of patience began to ebb.

"Eddie," he told her.

"Short for Edward, huh?"

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"No. Just plain Eddie. My daddy wanted me to be named after my mother. Her name was Edie."

"Was?"

"She died when I was little."

"Oh. Sorry," said Sugar. And she was. Her own mother, Verbenia, whom everyone called Benny, was a huge pain in the ass at times, but Sugar loved her dearly and would not have wanted to lose her.

At the Greyhound station, Eddie got his olive-drab canvas sea bag out of one of the pay lockers, then he and Sugar continued on their way toward Decatur Street, where the girl and her mother lived.

"So what was that you were asking Rainey about?" she wanted to know, "Something about two guys leaving your daddy in an alley?"

"Long story," Eddie said, and did not elaborate.

Sugar shrugged, as if not really that interested, but knowing she'd find out sooner or later. As Eddie himself had said earlier, there were always ways to find out things in the *Vieux Carre.*

"So what were you doing in the poolroom?" he asked. "Shouldn't a kid like you be in school?"

"I am not a *kid,*" Sugar said, tossing him a scathing glance. "I've already graduated high school. I happen to be nineteen."

"Yeah, right," Eddie replied. "And I happen to be Louis Armstrong."

"You're not either," she snapped. "Louis Armstrong's dead. Besides, he played trumpet, you play clarinet; I heard you tell Rainey so." She bit her lip briefly, her way of deciding something. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one going on thirty-five—and I can *prove* my age."

"Well, good for you!"

"Anyway, what *were* you doing in Rainey's poolroom?"

"Long story," she said, and looked away.

They had no further conversation for the rest of the walk to Decatur Street.

Rainey found Mr. Gaston in his office above Tradition Hall. The club owner had just mixed his midmorning chicory-laced coffee and brandy and was browsing through a June 1932 issue of *Jazz Life* from a stack of old magazines he had in one corner.

"See you a minute, boss?" Rainey asked at the door.

"Of course," Gaston said. He rose and mixed an identical cup of coffee for the old black man he had known for fifty years. Rainey sat before the desk and the two men sipped the hot, syrupy brew.

"McCulla's kid done come back," Rainey said.

Gaston's eyebrows went up. "No fooling? You see him?"

"He come in de pool hall. Wants his daddy's clarinet back."

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"Good." Gaston's face brightened. "Can he play?"

"Ah 'specks so. He got de genes for it."

"Yes, he has. Daddy was Lew McCulla, granddaddy was old Nance Bardeau, played with the original Fudge Ripples." Gaston rose and crossed the office. "I've got his clarinet in the safe. I'll get it."

Rainey waited until Gaston returned to the desk with a black, matte-leather clarinet case and sat down again. Then he said, "Somethin' else he want, too."

"What's that?"

"Names of de two mens who lef' his daddy in de alley dat night."

"Oh, hell," said Gaston, his pleased expression fading. "What'd you tell him?"

"Dat Ah'd ax round."

"Maybe you could just tell him that they were from out of town."

"He already know dat," Rainey said, shaking his head. "An' he know dey worked for Calder Lingle, too."

"Hell," Gaston said again. It was the only expletive he ever used, having a personal aversion to ungentlemanly language. "How serious do you think he is?"

"Well, he jes' got out de Marines, an' his eyes look like Dix's looked when he got out dat Texas state pen."

"That's serious," Gaston allowed. Dix was a horn man who had taken a killing rap for the woman he loved, and had come back to the *Vieux Carre* to kill her for breaking her promise to wait for him. Gaston, Rainey, and a jazz-loving cop named George Tennell had helped him change his mind and now Dix was first trumpet and leader of Gaston's Tradition Hall Dixieland group.

"Maybe you can think of something, boss, and get Mr. Tennell to he'p us again," Rainey suggested.

"Maybe," said Gaston, stroking his freshly shaved chin. An old Creole barber came up to the office and shaved Gaston with the club owner's personal pearl-handled straight razor every day at seven A.M. and five P.M., then massaged his face with Bay Rum tonic. Gaston liked to look impeccable. "Where's the kid now?"

"Ah had Sugar take him over to Decatur Street to get a room."

"Sugar still looking for Roy Britt?"

"'Course. He de on'y daddy dat girl ever had; she want to find him in the worse way."

"She doesn't suspect that you're hiding him, I hope."

"'Course not, boss. Don't nobody know dat but you."

"Well, keep it that way. Jack Kono's never going to forgive Britt for double-crossing him. I don't want our names on the same list Kono's got Britt's name on."

"Lawd, me neither," Rainey vowed. "Dat Kono, he a spawn of de deb'l."

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"I'll talk to Tennell, see what we can do for the kid," Gaston said.

"Thanks, boss," old Rainey said, displaying a rare smile.

At the rooming house on Decatur Street, Benny's still-pretty face darkened into a frown when she saw her daughter with Eddie McCulla. With a figure every bit as full of curves as Sugar's, and reddish hair over freckles, no one on earth would have taken her for Sugar's mother. Tapping one foot, she confronted them as they were coming up the front stairs.

"Just what, may I ask, is going on here, young lady?" she demanded of Sugar.

"Nothing's going on, Mama," Sugar told her. "Rainey just asked me to bring this boy over to see—"

"I'm not a boy," Eddie McCulla interjected, annoyed. It had not bothered him when Rainey called him the same thing.

"All right, then," Sugar retorted testily, "Rainey asked me to bring this *man* over to see about a room."

"Why aren't you in school?"

"They let out early today, Mama. Teachers' conference." Sugar kept an absolutely straight face. If there had been an Olympic competition for lying, she would have taken gold every time.

"I swear," Benny said peevishly, "they have more teachers' conferences than any school I ever heard of. I hope you weren't over at Rainey's bothering him again about finding Roy. I've told you a million times that Roy Britt is too smart to *ever* show up in N'Orleans again."

"No, Mama, I was just passing by when he called me to help this—" she glared irritably at Eddie "—this *man* find a room."

"Young man," Benny now directed her attention to Eddie, "did this girl tell you that she is a minor?"

"Mama!" Sugar yelped.

"She happens to be only seventeen years old, which is under the age of consent in Louisiana."

"Mother!" Sugar was mortified, turning as red as her complexion would allow.

"Yes, ma'am, she told me she was seventeen," Eddie replied blandly. Both mother and daughter looked at him in disbelief.

"She did?" Benny asked.

"Yes, ma'am. She told me she was seventeen and had been on her way home after school let out early, and that was when Rainey called her from the doorway of the pool hall where him and me were talking."

"Well, all right, then," Benny replied, chagrined. "Nothing personal, understand, but I have a mother's duty to look after my little girl—"

"Little girl! Mama—!"

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"Hush up, Sugar. No offense, young man."

"None taken, ma'am," said Eddie, solemn as a new priest. "Now about that room—?"

Benny sent him to the manager and Eddie rented a second-floor kitchenette with a hot plate and countertop refrigerator, a metal-framed double bed, and a scarred-up wooden table next to a window that looked out on Jackson Square. He was unpacking his sea bag and hanging up his extra uniforms a little while later when Sugar knocked and he let her in.

"Hey," she said sheepishly.

"Hey, yourself." He left the door open, all the way.

"That was right nice of you to keep me out of trouble with Mama," Sugar said. She walked around the room, touching things. "I guess I owe it to you to tell you what I was doing in the pool-room talking to Rainey."

"You don't owe me nothing," Eddie said. "Forget it."

"Well, see," Sugar unabashedly went immediately into her story, "Mama and me was living with this really, *really* nice guy named Roy Britt. He was a middleweight, had a twenty-and-fourteen record, but a lot of his losses had been on split decisions. What I mean is, he was a lot better fighter than you'd think with a record like that."

"Sugar, you don't have to explain all that to me," Eddie stressed.

"Anyway," she went heedlessly on, "this really, *really* bad dude named Jack Kono had a younger sister that was supposed to be, like, so, *so* foxy—me, I didn't think she was all that hot-looking at all—anyways, she was getting ready to run away with some auto mechanic across the river in Gretna, and big-shot Kono didn't approve, so he made a deal with Roy that Roy would work the guy over, in exchange for which Kono would help Roy make a comeback by getting him a fight up in Atlantic City. Well, Roy found out that the *real* reason Kono was pissed off was because *he* had been having sex with her—can you believe that! I mean, his own *sister!*

"Anyway, Roy found out the real story and let the sister and her boyfriend run away. Then when Kono and one of his hoods got in Roy's face for not keeping his part of the deal, Roy beat the living *crap* out of both of them. Broke Kono's jaw and he had to have it *wired.* Naturally, after that Roy had to split. He hopped a bus for Houston that same night; me and Mama went with him, of course; I mean, the three of us had been together so long, we were almost like a real family by then. But Roy, he noticed a couple of Kono's other hoods had seen us get on the bus, so he knew they'd be following us and waiting at every stop along the way to see if he got off. So when Mama and me went to sleep, Roy got off at a rest stop just outside Lafayette and let the bus leave without him. We later found out, when we were looking for him, that he called the

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Lafayette cops from the rest-stop cafe, and when they got there he turned the two hoods in for carrying guns. After they were arrested, why, Roy, he just disappeared. Me and Mama come on back to N'Orleans 'cause we didn't know nothing else to do. That was six years ago."

Eddie, by now intrigued, had stopped unpacking and was listening with rapt attention to Sugar's story. After she stopped talking, he waited a full minute, then said, "Well?"

"Well what?" she asked.

"Well, dummy, did he ever come back or not?"

"I'm not sure. A friend of mine named Jaysie, works over to Coley's Cafe as a night waitress, said she was sure she'd seen him a couple weeks ago up on Royal Street. I been asking Rainey every couple days if he's heard from him; Roy worked for Rainey once in a while at the pool hall—between fights, you know—but Rainey says he hadn't heard anything about Roy being back. Mama, she just thinks Jaysie's mistaken; she don't think Roy's *ever* coming back. Not 's long as Jack Kono's still around."

"Can't somebody do something about this guy Kono?"

Sugar grunted. "Jack Kono's a killer, Eddie. Everybody's afraid of him. What can anybody do about a *killer?*"

"Kill him," Eddie McCulla said quietly.

Sugar fell silent. Eddie resumed unpacking. Sugar watched him for a long time without speaking.

Gaston walked downstairs from his office and sat down at the small corner table where George Tennell ate dinner every night while the Tradition Hall musicians tuned their instruments and warmed up. Tennell was big, black, and known to criminals as the meanest cop in the *Vieux Carre.* The only things in the world he loved were Dixieland jazz, crab cakes, and gin. He and Gaston had known each other for forty years.

"You remember Lew McCulla?" Gaston asked him.

Tennell nodded. "Clarinet man. Jazz Hall of Fame. Car run over his hands after he was beat up over a gambling debt and dropped in an alley one night behind Virgil's Club over on Basin Street. Had to have both hands amputated. Died in the hospital that same night. Rumor was, the plug got pulled on his life-support system. Had a kid that disappeared the next day. Rumor was, the kid might have pulled the plug."

"Rumor also was," Gaston added, "that McCulla *asked* the kid to do it. Clarinetist without hands can't find much work. Anyway, he'd been a lush ever since his wife, Edie, died of a brain tumor. Remember her: Edie Bardeau, old Nance Bardeau's girl?"

"I remember," Tennell said around a mouthful of crab cake. "What's your point?"

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"Good blood, that's my point. If the kid killed his daddy, it was to put him out of his misery. Hell, the kid took care of Lew McCulla like he was a baby. Shined shoes all over the Quarter so's he could save a thousand dollars to put him in a sanitarium to get him off the juice. Came close to doing it, too."

Tennell took a sip of room-temperature gin and swished it around in his mouth to mix with the crab-cake taste. "All right, Gaston," he said after he swallowed, "I get the idea. Lew McCulla's kid is as pure as the driven snow. Anything else?"

"Nothing much. Except that he's back. Just out of the Marines. Picked up his daddy's clarinet. And he's pestering Rainey to find out who the two guys were that left his daddy in that alley."

Tennell shrugged. "Out-of-towners. From up Kansas City way."

"He knows that. But Rainey thinks he's bound and determined to go after them. Rainey says the kid learned killing in the Marines."

"Good school," Tennell allowed. "What's your interest in all this?"

"He plays clarinet better than his daddy did."

Tennell's eyebrows went up. "Who says?"

"Rainey says. Kid's been practicing over at the pool hall since he got his daddy's clarinet back. Can't read a note of music, but Rainey says he can play from finger-position memory any piece you name. Rainey puts him right up there with Jimmy Noone and Louis Cottrell."

"That's fast company," said Tennell. "I'd have to hear it to believe it."

"You can hear it tomorrow night. I'm having Rainey bring him over to sit in with Dix and the band. If he's as good as Rainey says, you think he'd be worth keeping?"

"At any price," Tennell said.

Gaston smiled and stood up. Coming from George Tennell, those words were as good as a Cajun blood oath.

"By the way," Gaston said before leaving, "how would you feel about getting rid of Jack Kono?"

Tennell grunted. "That's like asking me how I'd feel about getting rid of world hunger. Kono's like a virus in N'Orleans. He's responsible for more misery and grief than the police department can keep up with. Sometimes I think he must be the Antichrist. Trouble is, there's nothing anybody can do about him; he's got stuff on too many judges and commissioners and aldermen. Everybody in town's afraid to touch him."

"How about somebody from *out* of town," Gaston asked, almost rhetorically. "Somebody from up Kansas City, say. Like the two apes that beat up Lew McCulla and dumped him in that alley?"

Tennell put down his fork and picked up his glass. Swishing a

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little more gin, he studied Gaston for a long moment, then began to slowly nod his head.

"Might work," he said thoughtfully. "Just might work."

Old Rainey walked down the darkened street carrying a brown paper bag in one hand, and presently arrived at and unlocked the front door of the poolroom which he had closed up a couple of hours earlier. Making his way past the still tables and racks of cue sticks in the dimly lighted room, he passed into a smaller second room which was outfitted with a bed, rocking chair, television, card table and folding chairs, stove, and refrigerator. And, against the back wall, a bookcase on rollers. Rainey pushed aside the bookcase, exposing an open door, and said through the door, "Ah'm back wif' de ice cream."

Roy Britt came through the door. "What kind?"

"It called Cookie-Dough Chocolate-Chip Caramel."

"Sounds good," said Roy.

Roy Britt was no longer a middleweight, but a light-heavyweight now, up to about one-seventy. Most of it was muscle, however, because his years on the run away from New Orleans and Jack Kono had involved the kind of day labor that kept body fat down: digging ditches, unloading long-haul trucks, shoveling gravel, stacking cement blocks, and the like. Sometimes he'd take a break and bus tables or wash dishes for a while—low pay but free meals—and then he'd put on a pound or three which, when he went back to outdoor labor, would harden to muscle instead of sweating off. A good thing about it was that the scar tissue under each eyebrow, from his days in the ring, was less prominent now, less noticeable, and he was not pegged for a pug on every new job he took. Plus, he was less likely to be spotted by someone who had heard the word put out on him by Jack Kono.

The two men sat down now and began eating the ice cream together. It was because the poolroom had once been an illegal gambling club that there was a secret room in the back that one could access by pushing aside the bookcase on rollers to expose a hidden door. Old Rainey had been living in the room with the bookcase for a couple of years now, since his rheumatism had become so bad that he no longer enjoyed leisurely walks to and from work. The bookcase itself was filled with old 78-rpm Dixieland jazz records dating back to the 1920s, some of them so rare they were worth upwards of a thousand dollars to collectors. Rainey liked to listen to them at night while he cooked his perennial black-eyed peas, okra, and salt pork for supper.

Nobody else knew about the secret room except Mr. Gaston, who owned the building. When Roy Britt had come back to New Orleans from his self-imposed exile, old Rainey had been the only

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person he trusted enough to contact. Roy was looking for Benny and Sugar, looking for a way for the three of them to get back together somewhere without Jack Kono finding out about it and sending some ape to kill Roy—and maybe Benny and Sugar as well. Rainey had asked Mr. Gaston if he could hide Roy in the secret room, and Gaston had reluctantly given his approval, but only on condition that Rainey keep the ex-fighter in check and not divulge his presence even to Benny and Sugar. Mr. Gaston was an influential man in the *Vieux Carre,* but he, like everyone else, had a healthy fear of Jack Kono. The oddly chalk-white Cajun, with his strange reptilian eyes, killed too easily, and often for matters too trivial, not to be seriously dreaded by them all.

"Dey's talk dat Jack Kono ain't gon' be round much longer," Rainey said casually as they ate.

Roy Britt frowned. "How come? They finally gonna put him in jail?"

"Naw, dey never put dat man in jail," Rainey scoffed. "He too smart. Got all dat Cajun guile an' wile in his blood, all dat slyness."

"Well, why ain't he gonna be round then?" Roy asked.

"Ah heered two mens was comin' to town lookin' to kill him."

Roy grunted. "Well, he's got that coming, sure enough."

Having planted the seed he wanted to plant, Rainey now abruptly changed the subject. "Ah think Sugar done found herself a boyfriend." Same casual tone, causing Roy to frown again.

"Who?" he demanded indignantly.

"Young man jes' come back to N'Orleans from de Marines. Clarinet player. Gon' get hisself a good job playing, maybe at de Hall. Sugar, she in here ever' day axing me all kinds of questions 'bout him. Dat on'y mean one thing wif' a woman: dey innerested."

"Sugar's too young to get involved with a man," Roy declared.

Rainey snorted. "You ain't seen her lately. She built like her mama, 'cept tighter."

"Well, I don't like it," said Roy. So much that he stopped eating his ice cream. That serious.

"Well," Rainey now carefully reasoned, "if two mens *does* come to town, and *does* kill ol' Jack Kono, den you be able to come out de hidin' and start lookin' af'er her a'gin."

"Yeah, right," Roy eagerly agreed. "I just hope they get the job done soon."

"Ah feels de same way," Rainey bolstered him. "Ah'd even he'p 'em if'n Ah could."

"Yeah, me too."

"Dat Jack Kono, he de spawn of Lucifer if'n ever der' be one."

"Sure is."

"Well," Rainey concluded, "who knows, maybe you or me be able

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to he'p dem two mens. Never can tell." He smacked his lips a little. "Dis here sho' good ice cream."

Sugar could hardly contain herself, she was so excited about Eddie's invitation to join a set with the Tradition Hall band.

"God, Eddie! Do you realize what an honor that is!" she all but shrieked when he told her about it.

Eddie had found her in his room when he came back from seeing Rainey. She was propped up on his bed reading a movie magazine she had stolen from the gift shop in the Royal Orleans Hotel.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, slightly piqued. "How'd you get in?"

"Picked the lock with a bent paper clip," she said. "Mr. Sweeney, a burglar who used to live in three-oh-nine, taught me how to do it. He was such a nice little man. He's doing six-to-ten in Angola now."

"You're going to be doing six-to-ten yourself if you're not careful," Eddie lectured. "Rainey says you shoplift anything that's not nailed down."

"Rainey's a sweetheart, but he exaggerates," she responded. "Were you able to find out if he knows anything about where Roy is?"

"No. He says he doesn't know."

Then he told her about Mr. Gaston wanting him to play clarinet in the band's second set that night. As Sugar was gushing over it, Benny came to the open door and fixed her daughter in the kind of glare that only a mother can focus.

"What, may I ask, are you doing in this man's room, young lady?" she demanded, one foot beginning to tap threateningly. Luckily, Sugar, in her enthusiasm, had jumped off the bed and was upright.

"Oh, Mama, the most wonderful thing's happened!" she said, her pretty young face lighting up in her exuberance. "Eddie's been asked to try out in a set at Tradition Hall tonight! Isn't that marvelous!"

"Well, my, yes, it is," Benny said, turning to look at Eddie in a whole new light. "Only the best play at Tradition Hall. Do you think they'll offer you a job?"

"I don't know," Eddie said, "I don't have much experience—"

"Rainey says he's *real* good, Mama!" Sugar gushed some more. "Oh, Mama, can we go to the Hall tonight and hear him? *Please,* Mama—"

"Sugar, you know I don't have the money to buy dinner at Tradition Hall," Benny told her. "My tips lately haven't hardly been enough to keep up with the rent—"

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"Come as my guests, ma'am," Eddie offered. "I'd like it if you would."

"No, we couldn't do that. What if you don't get offered a job? I mean, you're just out of the service, you've got rent to pay, too—"

"I've got my discharge pay," Eddie insisted. "I'd really like for you to come. I'd like to have somebody in the audience that I know."

"Well," Benny said hesitantly, "if you're sure—"

"Oh, Mama, won't it be fun!"

Sugar danced around the room, smiling, head thrown back, kissing her mother, hugging Eddie, then immediately beginning to make plans. "You've got to get some new clothes," she announced. "You can't play Tradition Hall in a *uniform!* Mama, can I take Eddie over to Canal Street so he can shop? I'm sure he needs help; I mean, just being out of the service, he can't know the styles or *anything.*"

"All right, I guess, if he wants you to. But you be home by six so we can get ready to go."

"I will." Sugar handed her mother the movie magazine. "Put this on my bed, please."

"Where'd you get that?" Benny asked suspiciously. She had heard rumors about her daughter's quick fingers.

"Eddie bought it for me." She took him by the arm. "Come on, Mr. Musician," she said, pulling him quickly through the door.

On the way down the block, Eddie lectured Sugar. "You shouldn't lie to your mother so much," he said.

Sugar responded in typical Sugar fashion. "I don't lie. I fib."

"If you get caught stealing, they'll put you in the reformatory," he warned.

"They will not. I'll be a first offender, so all's I'll get is probation."

"You ought to be going to high school every day, too. How do you ever expect to graduate and make anything of yourself?"

"Did you graduate?" she challenged.

"No. Haven't made anything of myself, either."

"Not much you haven't! Been in the Marines. Got medals. Know how to play the clarinet. Getting a tryout at Tradition Hall. You're a real loser, all right." As soon as they got around the corner where Sugar was sure her mother could not see them, she linked her arm with Eddie's and said, "You like me, don't you?" Leaning, she kissed him on the cheek. "Never mind, you don't have to answer that. I know you like me, otherwise you wouldn't care about me getting into trouble and all that. And just for your information, I like you, too." The sassiness left her voice and its tone grew throaty. "I like you a lot."

Eddie pulled her into a shadowy doorway between two storefronts. Gathering her close to him, he kissed her, firmly, intensely.

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She held the back of his head and returned his passion with a kiss of her own. When their lips parted, just enough to breathe, he said, "You little smartass. You know I've been crazy about you since the day I got here." Sugar twisted her face around and got the lobe of his ear between her teeth. She bit a little too hard and he had to pull away. "That hurt."

"I know it did, but you liked it. I can tell."

"How can you tell?"

She pushed herself tighter against him. "You know how I can tell. You want me to sneak out and come to your room tonight after Mama's asleep?"

"No, I do not. You're only seventeen, remember? Anyway, I don't want us to get involved until after I get back from a trip I have to make to Kansas City. I've got something I have to do and I don't want you on my mind."

Sugar shook her head. "You might not have to go to Kansas City. Rainey said those two men might be coming down here to N'Orleans."

"What two men?"

She pinched his arm. "You know very well what two men. Rainey told me all about how they beat up your daddy and left him in an alley and a car ran over both of his hands. Then he just died in the hospital that night—"

"He didn't exactly just die—"

"Yes, he did, Eddie!" she said adamantly. "Don't you ever tell me any different. Rainey said he died because he *wanted* to die—and however he did it was *his* business."

Eddie's eyes grew moist.

"Stop that," Sugar said. "From now on, if there's any crying to do, we'll do it together. And I'm too happy right now to cry."

She pulled his face to hers and they locked lips again, and held.

They stayed in the doorway for a long time, and when they left they walked with their arms around each other. Sugar's face was luminous with joy, and when she looked at Eddie he smiled back at her with more warmth than she had ever seen in his face. She did not notice that the warmth did not extend to his eyes. They remained as glacial as always, because Eddie was thinking that it would ruin everything if the two men came to New Orleans. He had planned to kill them in Kansas City, then flee *back* to New Orleans. If he killed them in New Orleans, he would have to run away from *there,* leave everything behind, just like that ex-fighter, Roy Britt, had done. He would hate that.

But it had to be done. He had to kill the men who had made it necessary for him to kill his daddy.

Back behind the bandstand at Tradition Hall that night, Eddie sat

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on a wooden stool in a corner, toes pumping his knees up and down, fingers fidgeting over the clarinet that had belonged to his father. The instrument was made of African blackwood, twenty-six-and-a-half inches long, pitched in B-flat. The mouthpiece was of the highest grade ebonite, the reed of natural cane. Its finger holes were identical to the flute fingering system developed by Heinrich Boehm in 1832. It was a splendid instrument.

Rainey, standing next to Eddie, noticed the restiveness of his fingers. "What you nervous 'bout, boy?" he asked. "Somepin' wrong wif' dat instrument?"

"No," Eddie said, "the stick's okay. It's the clothes; I feel funny in them."

Rainey took a step back and scrutinized him with a frown. Gray trousers, navy blue blazer, white shirt open at the collar, black loafers, black socks. "Look good to me," Rainey said.

"What looks good to you, Rainey?" a voice asked.

Mr. Gaston walked up.

"His clothes, boss. He worried 'bout how dey look."

Gaston then scrutinized Eddie with a frown. From the breast pocket of his own immaculately tailored Italian gabardine suit coat, he took a white silk handkerchief and arranged it just so in the breast pocket of Eddie's blazer.

"It's perfect now," he said, and went on his way.

The Tradition Hall band began straggling back in through the alley door from their smoke break between the first and second sets. Dix, the trumpeter and leader of the group, came toward them.

"Here he come," Rainey said. "Bes' horn man in N'Orleans now dat Mr. Al Hirt done passed." He snapped his fingers. "Get on yo' feet."

Dix walked up to them, a tall, rangy man with lines in his face from the sixteen years he'd spent in Huntsville for a killing across the Texas line that he hadn't done. He'd saved a woman named Madge, whom he loved and who *had* done the killing, from taking the rap. Madge was now serving twelve years in the St. Gabriel Women's Prison for allegedly killing her drug-addict lover the very day Dix returned home. There were some in the *Vieux Carre* who said that she had been framed to get her out of Dix's life so he could return to the music that was in his blood; there were some who even whispered that Mr. Gaston and George Tennell had something to do with that, but Dix never listened to idle talk. He believed that whatever happened was meant to be; he still loved Madge and made the hundred-mile trip north to visit her every Saturday, and he knew that someday they would be together.

When Dix got to where they were standing, he put an arm

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around old Rainey's shoulders and hugged him, then held a hand out to Eddie.

"I knew your daddy, Eddie," he said, shaking hands. "If you're anywhere near as good on that stick as he was, I'll be wanting to talk to you about a job. But I'm not going to make it a walk in the park for you. This next set we're going to be playing some real old stuff. If you can hang with us on that, we'll all know you can play anything. Okay?"

"Yessir, fine, sir," Eddie said anxiously.

"Drop the 'sir,' Eddie," Dix said with a grin. "We're all just a bunch of tramp musicians round here." He bobbed his chin at the bandstand. "Let's go to work."

Eddie followed the tall trumpeter, and Rainey followed Eddie, patting him on the shoulder all the way to the bandstand, then smiling and sitting down on the floor behind it to enjoy the music he had loved for seventy-five years.

Out in the audience, Gaston joined George Tennell at his usual table.

"This better be good," Tennell grumbled. The big policeman had agreed to eat later than usual in order to hear McCulla's kid play.

"It'll be good," Gaston assured him. "Rainey vouched for the boy. And Rainey's got the best ear for traditional Dixieland of anyone in the *Vieux Carre.*" After a beat, he quickly added, "Except you, of course."

Tennell smiled. He knew that Gaston wanted to involve him in a scheme to keep the kid out of trouble so he could play in the Tradition Hall band. And he knew it was something like killing that doper years earlier and framing Madge Noble for it. Only this time it might not be just a doper and a two-timing woman that Tennell rid the *Vieux Carre* of, it might be that scum Jack Kono himself, who was as evil a cretin as ever walked the Quarter's sacred streets.

To Tennell, those streets *were* sacred. He had run them first as a barefoot, homeless kid who could not, because of some deep repression, even remember his beginnings. Later, he had walked them as a ward of the St. Pierre Colored Orphanage, until he was twelve. After that, he had worked as an errand boy, then numbers runner, for a slick young gambler and bootlegger who would eventually become the dapper club owner sitting across from him.

Gaston had offered young George his own numbers route when he turned eighteen, but the war had started and Tennell, feeling patriotic, had enlisted in the army and gone off to fight. When he got back, Gaston not only owned Tradition Hall but half a dozen smaller jazz clubs as well—and, thanks largely to black-market profits from tires, sugar, and silk stockings, had become com-

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pletely legitimate. Once again he offered Tennell a job, club manager this time, but Tennell joined the police force instead. Over the years he had become a legend, first in the colored district, the only place he was allowed to work, and later in the *Vieux Carre,* where his job was to keep the peace any way he could. Occasionally it was by the use of deadly force, as when he killed Madge Noble's doper lover as a favor to Gaston; but Tennell did not kill promiscuously, or frivolously, as, for instance, Jack Kono did. Tennell weighed the pluses and minuses of killing before he did it. Madge Noble's boyfriend, for example, had snatched a woman's purse for money to feed his arm and inadvertently caused the woman's stroller, carrying her toddler, to roll into the street where it was struck by a car and the child killed. The doper had been let off for that; under the court's formula of justice, the child's death was not a premeditated part of the purse-snatching, so the doper only served six months for attempted robbery.

But under George Tennell's formula of pluses and minuses, the doper had paid a heavier price.

"You sure this kid will stay on if we take this problem off his back?" Tennell asked Gaston as the musicians started returning to the bandstand for their second set.

"Positive," said Gaston. He pointed to a nearby table. "See that cute little Creole gal over there?" Tennell looked at where Benny and Sugar were sitting. "Rainey says the kid's stuck on her. He's sure they'll get together if I hire the kid."

Tennell nodded. If Sugar got a boyfriend, he thought wryly, it should significantly reduce his petty-theft complaints. He said nothing about it to Gaston, however. No sense in giving the girl a bad reputation if Eddie McCulla could straighten her out.

Lights in the dining room were lowered as the Tradition Hall band went into its first number. It was *Riverboat Shuffle.*

"That's an old one," Tennell commented.

"Oh yeah," Gaston agreed. "Hoagy Carmichael wrote that for Bix Biederbecke back in nineteen twenty-four."

"That's right, when Bix had the 'Wolverines,' up in Richmond, Indiana."

Next the band went into *Snake Rag.*

"My God," Tennell said. "I haven't heard that one in years. King Oliver wrote that."

"Sure did," said Gaston.

The club owner watched the policeman watching the young clarinetist in the blue blazer, his trained ears seeking out the sound of that one instrument in order to evaluate it. But Tennell could not isolate Eddie's clarinet. It blended too well, mixed too finely, made too perfect a meld with the other instruments. Still, Tennell

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watched *how* Eddie McCulla played—and how he looked *as* he played.

On the band went: *Bogalusa Strut, Savoy Blues.*

"They're not giving the kid an easy ride," Tennell commented quietly.

"No," Gaston said. "Ordinary musicians never heard of these pieces."

Sugar Foot Stomp.

Tidal Boogie.

Tennessee Slim's Blues.

"All right," Tennell said after that last one. "Make the call. Set it up."

Along about midnight, Rainey sat across from Gaston as he dialed the number of Kid Benoit's Jazz Club in Kansas City, where Calder Lingle, the city's illegal-gambling czar, had his office.

"Benoit's," a gruff voice answered.

"Mr. Lingle, please."

"Who's calling?"

"Gaston, from N'Orleans. He knows me."

"Hold on."

Gaston winked at Rainey, who held up both hands, one with his leathery fingers crossed, the other holding his lucky rabbit's foot, which he had carried for so long it was nearly hairless. The sight of the grungy thing was distasteful to Gaston, but he nevertheless smiled and nodded at his old friend.

Presently a voice came on the line. "Gaston? That you?"

"Hello, Calder. Yes, it's me. How are you?"

"Getting older, Gaston, getting older."

"Know anyone who isn't?" Gaston asked with a chuckle. "How's your health, my friend?"

"Oh, the usual aches and pains. Some high blood pressure. And I have something called tinnitus. It makes you hear noises when there are none. You?"

"Same ulcer I've had since the old days," Gaston told him. "And a little arthritis in my knuckles."

"Well, that doesn't sound too bad." Calder Lingle laughed. "Fortunately, neither one of us has to do any heavy lifting." He paused a beat, then asked, "What's on your mind, Gaston?"

"I wanted to inquire about a couple of boys that you sent down here a few years ago to educate a deadbeat clarinet player named Lew McCulla. Recall the matter?"

"Yeah. Couple of my strong-arm boys, named Al and Max. Why?"

"I was impressed with them when they were in my office trying to find McCulla, and also with the way they handled the matter. A

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friend of mine down here—Jack Kono, you know him? Cajun fellow—"

"Heard of him, don't know him."

"Well, there's a guy he wants taken care of, an ex-pug, something to do with his kid sister, I don't know all the details. I was wondering, first, if your guys did anything heavier than strong-arm, and, second, if you'd be interested in hiring them out?"

"How complicated would the job be?" Lingle wanted to know.

"Not complicated at all," Gaston assured him. "We'd arrange it so that Mr. Kono and the ex-pug would be alone somewhere with no witnesses. Your guys would just walk in, do it, and walk out. All Mr. Kono would know is that two complete strangers did it. The suggestion would be made that it probably had something to do with gambling and the fight game. People will believe anything bad about boxing. How much do you think your boys would want?"

"Let me worry about how much they get," Lingle said at once. "I'd say it would be worth twenty thousand, payable to me."

"That sounds reasonable. But I'll have to clear it with Kono, since the money will be coming from him."

"Okay, but let's understand that I'm not dealing with this Kono, I'm dealing with you," Lingle emphasized. "You'll have to guarantee payment."

"No problem," Gaston agreed. "I guarantee payment, you guarantee that your boys do the job right. Let me get back to you tomorrow night."

When the call ended, Gaston sat back in his big swivel chair and folded his arms. "Well, that part of it worked," he said to Rainey. "Now it's up to you to handle McCulla's kid and the boxer."

"Ah can do dat," old Rainey said. "Ah can get bof' dem boys to do things Rainey's way. Dey won't be no trouble a'tall."

"I hope not," Gaston said solemnly. "I'd hate for us to get caught between Calder Lingle and Jack Kono. Be like being in quicksand with nothing to grab hold of but a python."

"Lawd, ain't dat de truf'," Rainey said, rolling his eyes up until only the whites showed.

One week later, Roy Britt telephoned Jack Kono at his private social club, a storefront on Royal Street with the windows painted black and a MEMBERS ONLY sign on the door.

"Kono, this is Roy Britt," he said when the Cajun got on the phone. "Remember me?"

"Of course," Kono hissed his reply. "How could I ever forget you, Roy? You're at the very top of my list of people to torture extensively before I kill them."

"Well, before you get so eager to do that," Roy said, "how'd you like to know where your sister Angela is?"

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There was silence on the line.

"All right, Britt, you have my attention," Kono said.

"I want to square myself with you," Roy told him. "I called to ask if telling you where Angela was would do it."

"How do you know where she is?" Kono asked.

"I been bumming around all over since I left N'Orleans," Roy said. "I happened to see that guy Denny Boyle, that she run off with, on the street one day in another city. I followed him to an apartment where him and her is living. They've got a kid."

"A child?" Kono said, surprised. "My little Angela has a child?"

"Yeah. Little girl. Pretty little thing, looks just like her."

"All right," Kono said at once. "If you'll tell me where she is, I'll wipe the slate clean between us. Where is she?"

"I want a handshake on it, Kono."

"I'm giving you my word."

"Your word ain't worth shit, Kono. But everybody in the Quarter knows that your handshake is sacred to you. I want a handshake on this."

"All right, all right," Kono said irritably. "When, where?"

"How 'bout noon tomorrow, right there at your club."

"Fine."

"I don't want to see Shimmy or none of your other boys around either, Kono," Roy cautioned. "If I do, I won't tell you nothing."

"I'll be alone, Britt," Kono said contemptuously. "Think I'm scared of a punk like you?"

"No reason to be," Roy said, "since we're gonna be friends again."

"We're going to be *even,* Britt. We're not going to be friends."

"Whatever. See you tomorrow."

Roy hung up. He turned to Rainey, who was with him in the back room at the pool hall.

"How'd I do?" Roy asked.

"Jes' fine," Rainey said with a smile. "Jes' fine, indeed." He patted Roy on the shoulder. "I tol' you ever'thing work out jes' fine if we does it Rainey's way."

The next day, Rainey summoned Eddie McCulla to the pool hall.

"Dem two mens from Kansas City is in town. Ah knows whar' dey gon' be in a little while. Ah take you dere and point 'em out to you. Den you can follow 'em. How you figger to kill 'em?"

Eddie took a switchblade stiletto from his pocket and thumbed it open.

Rainey smiled. "Dat de blade you use to carry when you was a shoeshine boy here in de Quarter?"

"Same one," Eddie said.

"Can you get bof' of dem wif' it?"

"Sure, easy. Walk right up, give each of them a quick stick in the

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liver, then when they grab their stomachs, give them a quick stick in the jugular. One in the gut, one in the neck. Makes the body go crazy. It don't know which way to die."

Lawd, Lawd, Rainey thought, dis boy am *cold.* Good thing he such a good clarinet player. Dat make him worth saving.

Over at Tradition Hall, Al and Max, the two thugs from Kansas City, walked into Gaston's office. The club owner rose to greet them.

"Hello, boys." He extended his hand. "Nice to see you again."

After shaking hands, Al said, "Mr. Lingle told us to see you about fingering this mark."

"Right. It's a perfect setup," Gaston told them. He gave them the address of Jack Kono's private club on Royal Street, which Max wrote down on a matchbook cover. "Mr. Kono will be meeting privately with this ex-pug in about an hour, supposedly to talk to him about locating his sister. All you have to do is walk in and put the blast on him. Mr. Kono's story will be that he went to the men's room and heard the shots while he was in there. When he ran back out, you guys were already gone; he never even saw you. His take on the shooting will be that it was some kind of gambler's revenge for the guy not throwing some fight a few years back." Gaston looked from one thug to the other. "What do you think?"

Al and Max exchanged glances. Both shrugged. "Sounds okay," Al said. "How do we get to this address?"

Gaston gave them directions. The men shook hands again and the two thugs left.

Gaston picked up the telephone and called Rainey.

After Rainey spoke with Gaston, he said, "Jes' a minute," to Eddie McCulla, and walked into the back room. Pushing aside the roller-wheeled bookcase, he stuck his head through the door of the concealed room and said to Roy Britt, "We goin' now. You leave in five minutes. Use de back door. Make sure you lock it behin' you. 'Member what to do?"

"I remember," Roy said with an edge. "I sure hope this works."

Rainey shrugged. "If it don't, won't matter none to us. We all be dead by de time de sun go down."

Swell, Roy thought tensely. He started putting on his shoes as Rainey left.

Rainey went back out front. "Le's go," he said to Eddie. Outside, Eddie waited while Rainey locked the front door. Then they started walking toward Royal Street.

"If anybody sees me do it," Eddie said matter-of-factly, "I guess I'll have to beat it right away."

"I reckon," Rainey agreed.

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"Don't suppose it'd make much sense to take Sugar with me."

"Don't guess so. She too young to go on de lam."

They walked on a ways, then Eddie asked, "How long you think I'll have to stay away until the heat's off?"

"Not long," Rainey told him. "Fo' or fi' years is all."

Eddie felt a hollowness inside, as if the thought of hitting the road again, being off all on his own, alone, had reopened a cavity in him that had begun to close with his return to the *Vieux Carre* and the coming into his adult life of Rainey and Mr. Gaston and Dix, and especially Sugar. To give up all they had imbued him with in the short time he had been back, and the plans for his future that had grown from their friendship, began to seem almost unthinkable. Yet he knew he had to go forward with his plan, knew he could not renege on the vow he had made to himself as a boy. He had to commit this act in order to avenge the death of his father.

"Dey's still time to back off," Rainey pointed out.

Eddie shook his head. "No."

"Okay, den," Rainey said.

They turned onto Royal Street and Rainey led the younger man almost to the middle of the block and into the entryway of one of the small jazz clubs that did not open until early evening. There they waited, shoulder to shoulder, with a clear view of the block in both directions. Presently, coming from the same direction they had just come, but on the opposite side of the street, a lone figure in windbreaker and cap approached.

"See dat man?" Rainey bobbed his chin. "Dat's Roy Britt."

Eddie's mouth dropped open in surprise. "The guy Sugar's been trying to find?"

"De same. De mens you wants to kill been hired to kill *him.*"

"I don't understand, Rainey—"

"You will. Jes' wait."

As Roy approached Jack Kono's storefront club, Al and Max, the thugs from Kansas City, walked toward it from the opposite direction. They saw Roy turn in at the address they were looking for, exchanged a quick glance, and quickened their pace.

"Dat dem mens right dere," Rainey said.

"Rainey, we've got to help Britt!" Eddie said urgently, stepping forward.

Rainey grabbed his arm. "You be still. Somebody else gon' he'p him."

As Rainey spoke, George Tennell got out of a car parked two doors down from the storefront. He walked into Jack Kono's club a dozen steps behind Al and Max. Less than half a minute later, four shots sounded from inside.

Roy Britt came hurrying out of the club and started down the

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street. Rainey called to him and he ran over to where Rainey and Eddie stood.

"Two guys just tried to kill me, Rainey!" he yelled. "A policeman came in and shot them both."

As he spoke, a fifth shot was heard from Kono's place.

Three months later, Tennell, off duty, took a seat at the end of the bar in Tradition Hall's 1920s-style cocktail lounge, The Speakeasy. He ordered his usual double gin on the rocks. Before the bartender could serve it, Gaston walked behind the bar and said, "Cancel that order." Pulling a keychain from his pocket, he unlocked a private cabinet under the ornate bar and from it removed a square-shouldered, ruby-red bottle, splendidly labeled in deckle-edged parchment, with gold-embossed lettering that read:

COGNAC
DEPARTMENT CHARENTE
1822

"What's the occasion?" asked Tennell, as Gaston used a small pocketknife to cut the wax seal on the bottle.

"I just heard on the late news that the prosecutor's office closed the Kono case today," Gaston said. "The official finding is that Kono was killed by two hit men from Kansas City, and that their own deaths were justifiable homicide committed by you when they resisted arrest and were about to shoot you. Apparently no other conclusion could be reached, since the only witness supported your version of what happened." He smiled. "I guess Roy Britt did a good job in his deposition."

"Must have," Tennell allowed.

Gaston poured the precious cognac and both men inhaled its bouquet.

"Any fallout at City Hall over Kono's killing?" Gaston asked.

Tennell shook his head. "Most people were glad to see him get it. Any problems from Kansas City?"

"None. Lingle thinks his guys blew it. He actually apologized."

"How's Britt doing running the poolroom?"

"I'll tell you how he's doing," Gaston replied with a hint of self-satisfaction. "He's doing so well that I just bought O'Keefe's place and I'm putting him over there as my general manager."

Tennell was impressed. O'Keefe's Billiards and Pool Hall, on Rampart Street, was one of the finest parlors in town.

"Roy's going to do all right," Gaston said. "He and Sugar's mother, Benny, are getting married and moving into one of the new condos over on St. Claude Street."

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"The ones across from Louis Armstrong Park? Those are quite nice. What are you doing with the old poolroom?"

"Letting Rainey keep it. He's comfortable there. And it's a different clientele, so it won't be any competition for the new place."

From out in the main hall, the music from the band's last set of the night wafted in. They were playing *Richmond Blues.*

"How's McCulla's kid doing in the band?" Tennell asked. It was an idle question, Gaston knew.

"You tell me," the club owner countered. "You listen to him every night. How do you think he's doing?"

"He's not a bad clarinet player," Tennell said. From him, Gaston knew, that was high praise.

After their cupped hands had sufficiently warmed the nearly one-hundred-eighty-year-old cognac, the two friends began sipping it.

"Liquid heaven," said Tennell.

"Amen," agreed Gaston.

After the last set of the night, when Eddie got back to his room, he found Sugar there again.

But this time it was different.

Sugar had replaced all the white light bulbs with soft red ones that gave the place a rosy glow. There was a bottle of G. H. Mumm's Extra Dry in a cooler of ice on the nightstand, with two crystal champagne flutes next to it. The bed had fresh linen on it, turned back. And Sugar was decked out in a butterscotch-colored bikini with high-heeled shoes to match, which made her café au lait body look like the leggiest pagan temptress anyone could have fantasized.

"You don't have to leave the door open anymore, honeybunch," she said, throwing him a wink. "Today's my birthday." She handed him her birth certificate.

Eddie looked at it and closed the door. Shaking his head wryly, he wondered where she had stolen the champagne flutes. ●

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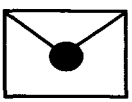

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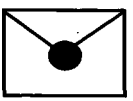

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A Stolen Life

by Martin Edwards

Lawyer, editor, anthologist, reviewer, novelist, and short story writer: Martin Edwards has distinguished himself in all his chosen fields. His new story for *EQMM* is a nonseries work, but his latest novel, *First Cut Is the Deepest,* recently out in paperback in the U.K., features his series hero, Harry Devlin. Like his Devlin books, Mr. Edwards's stories for us usually combine classical plotting and structure with a modern urban ambiance.

Tape 917, side A—August 6

A girl is missing in Cumbria. I know nothing about her beyond the bare details in a couple of newspaper paragraphs—yet the story makes me tremble. Is it foolish for me to be afraid? The girl's called Lucy Alpert; she's a student of twenty, holidaying on her own. The smudged black and white photograph doesn't flatter her: nondescript features and a prominent chin. She didn't show up at the place where she was expected. It's something and nothing, by no means a front-page story. More than likely, she's just run off with someone who gave her a second glance. Yet for all the warmth of this summer day, I have begun to feel afraid.

Of course I'm being melodramatic. An occupational hazard in my profession. There have been false alarms before and nothing came of them. The commentators often remark on my flair for anticipating risks, then seizing the moment. The truth is simple: I have an instinct for danger. So far it has served me well.

Nothing much else to report. The Boss is still sunning himself in Antigua. The rumour mill is working overtime at present, and Benjamin called me this morning and suggested we might get together for a bite to eat. Interesting. But I made an excuse; I learned long ago to trust no one. It's a mistake to put yourself in someone else's power. Besides, I need to take a walk around the park to order my thoughts. It's an afternoon to cast one's mind back to the past.

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In my first term at Oxford, even a girl as plain as Lucy Alpert would have seemed unattainable. Practically a goddess to a shy boy like myself. In those days, it was said that for every female student, there were ten young men. To have a girlfriend—any girlfriend—was to become an object of envy and admiration. No wonder Ramsey and I campaigned against the iniquities of sex discrimination.

Not that Ramsey had anything to worry about, of course. Girls flocked round him. It had been the same at school. We attended a small fee-paying place on the outskirts of Ravenglass, within thirty miles of both our homes. Like most public schools at the time, it was single-sex, but that didn't stop Ramsey regaling us with tales of his holiday conquests in such unlikely settings for the apprentice Lothario as Barrow-in-Furness, Grange-over-Sands, and Morecambe. He had something going with the school caretaker's daughter, to say nothing of a fling with the sister of our classmate Nigel Ashbrook. When we put on a joint production of *Death of a Salesman* with a girls' school, he played Willy Loman and had a brief affair with the pretty blond stage manager. My job was to help paint the scenery. I used to watch him intently, trying to divine the secret of his success. In the end, I persuaded myself that his regular features, thick wavy hair, and rugby-firmed muscles were not the reasons why he managed to seduce any young lass who took his fancy. It was his casual self-confidence. He expected to charm the girls, he never believed that he could fail. And he did not fail.

I was so different that I wondered why he and I remained friends. We had interests in common, naturally; politics, the theatre, and football, for example. But whereas he played centre forward for the school team and fancied a career as a Labour cabinet minister, I was as clumsy with a ball at my feet as I was tongue-tied in debate. I saw my future as an academic, engaged in endless research at the Bodleian, far from the public eye. Fame was in Ramsey's stars, everyone agreed.

I would have died rather than let him know just how much I admired him. Merely by tagging along with him since we were both eleven, I'd avoided most of the bullying that might otherwise have driven me to despair. All the same, I had no confidence. The spectacles—I hadn't yet come to terms with contact lenses—didn't help, nor did the shyness so deeply ingrained that I felt sick even at the prospect of chatting up a stranger. Once, during the holidays, when he was going out to a disco with Pauline Ashbrook, he arranged for a foursome: I was to pair up with Pauline's best friend, a girl called Zoe Gleave. It was a disaster. I doubt if Zoe and I exchanged a dozen sentences all evening, and when Ramsey and Pauline disappeared off together, I paid for a taxi to take her home. She didn't even bother to say goodnight.

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When I saw Ramsey the next day and told him the sad tale, he shrugged and said, "Better luck next time, mate."

I had already decided that there never would be a next time. I wasn't going to endure that kind of humiliation again. But I managed to stifle my embarrassment and ask—with a hapless attempt at a lascivious grin—how he had got on with Pauline.

"Mission accomplished," he said. "I won't be seeing her again, though, I don't think. She's far too clingy. Not my type, really, if you leave her tits out of it. So don't be downhearted. We're both in the same boat, you and me. Footloose and fancy free."

I suppose he said it to make me feel better. But I did experience a pang of sympathy for Pauline, even though she was not the first girl he'd dumped, nor would she be the last.

Oxford he regarded as a challenge, but within a week of our arrival, he was sleeping with a girl from Lady Margaret Hall. He'd met her on the first day of term, when we were all celebrating the reelection of Harold Wilson's government with a massively increased majority. She was passionate about politics, but her ardent feminist views were no protection against Ramsey's expert technique of seduction. For a month they went everywhere together, but then he met Leanne and instantly he was lost.

When he introduced me to Leanne, my immediate reaction was that she was the loveliest girl I'd ever seen. Her large dark eyes stared into mine with such intensity that for a wild instant I thought she was enraptured, until I realised that this was her nature. She gave everything her utmost concentration. When she spoke, which wasn't often, it was with a deliberation that invested even a commonplace remark about an essay with a hint of unfathomable wisdom. Usually Ramsey was wary of serious girls and preferred his women with a bit of flesh on them. Leanne was painfully thin, but even so she bowled him over. Perhaps it was because she didn't seem to be impressed by him. I've always believed that was the truth of it. He was accustomed to captivating people. Even those who didn't like him—and jealousy is, I have always reckoned, the commonest of all the deadly sins—found it hard to avoid coming under his spell and finding that they had agreed to do his bidding. I often thought he would have made a wonderful hypnotist.

Conversely, I suppose, hypnotists should make the best politicians. Perhaps they already do.

Tape 917, side B—August 8

I scanned the pages of the newspapers with even more care than usual this morning. Nothing worthy of comment in the broadsheets, although Bill is doing his best to stir trouble between Shaun and Duncan again. He's fed a story to the *Guardian* sug-

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gesting that Shaun's days are numbered. Because he's well-known as a Chandler fan, it was headed "Farewell, My Luvvy." It's still blazing hot in Antigua, it seems. Before long the Boss will be reported as saying: "Crisis, what crisis?" Ah well. It's not for me to bite the hand that feeds. Just to hope that it will feed me.

More about Lucy Alpert, in a couple of the tabloids. According to the *Express*, "fears are rising." There was more information in the *Mail*. Mr. and Mrs. Alpert are in a distressed state. Lucy has never done anything like this before, it seems. The nature of the coverage suggests to me that the police have hinted to the journalists that they are genuinely concerned. Perhaps she hasn't simply bumped into Mr. Right in a teashop at Hawes and decided to taste real life for the first time.

I'm worried sick, even though I keep telling myself that everything will be all right. Lucy will turn up safe and sound. Perhaps she's simply changed her plans and decided to go off for a hike in the Yorkshire Dales. Yet I can't bank on it. Not every missing person is found again.

I enjoyed Leanne's company from the outset. With her, I never went in for long, intense conversations. She was interested in politics, and when she talked about it, there was no denying that she had insight, although her views were scarcely radical. But one of the reasons why I liked her so much, quite apart from her waiflike good looks, was that she had a talent for the companionable silence. I never had the idea that I was under pressure to be witty or entertaining. Just as well, Ramsey might have said, in his familiar teasing fashion. But the more I came to know Leanne—and the three of us spent a great deal of time together during that first term—the more I became aware that Ramsey exhausted me. He was so vigorous, so full of the joys of being young. He could never stop doing things. Perhaps, as he said, that was what politics was all about. He'd even pinched a slogan from the Tories' feeble campaign back in '66, when we were both boys. "Action, not words." But there are occasions, I began to think, when there may be something to be said for quiet reflection.

Just possibly, Leanne may have felt the same way. I never discussed it with her during any of those long hours we spent in the Junior Common Room at college, leafing through the papers as we munched toast and drank bitter coffee. Yet there were odd moments when I would catch her eye at a time when Ramsey was in full flow and I'd see the faintest flicker of amusement in those earnest brown eyes. As if we were sharing a joke at his expense.

These brief platonic intimacies exhilarated me more than I can describe. It wasn't as though I disliked Ramsey. We were still the firmest of friends. Yet Leanne fascinated me, and I was flattered—

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pathetic as this may sound—by the way she treated me as an equal. It wasn't a familiar experience.

During the Christmas holidays, she came up to stay with Ramsey and his parents at their house in Ambleside. I saw plenty of the pair of them and it was during that week in January that I had the first sense that all was not well in the relationship.

Ramsey confided in me that she'd refused to share his bed. His parents had been quite relaxed about the couple sleeping together—Ramsey's father had made his money as an agent for a Liverpool pop group during the Mersey Beat era, his mother still sang in clubs when she got the chance, and they were the least shockable over-forties I knew—but Leanne had decided that it wasn't right. I don't imagine for one second that moral scruples troubled her. Ramsey had already given me to understand that, when in the mood, she was like a wild creature at bedtime; he'd even taken off his shirt and showed me the marks where she'd clawed him at the moment of climax. But it was an opportunity for her to make it clear that, although she might not say much, she was no chattel. She made up her own mind.

"It's such a bloody waste," he complained. "You know something? She even locks her door. Anyone would think she was a timid little virgin."

Ramsey became increasingly irritable. He wasn't used to being denied what he wanted. He told me that Leanne could be selfish; she wasn't sensitive to his needs. I muttered words of consolation, but privately my sympathies were with her. In fact, I could not resist a secret feeling of satisfaction. It would do my old friend good, I decided, to learn that none of us can have our own way all the time. Not, I must admit, that my reaction was entirely altruistic. Close as I was to Ramsey, I was only human; it was amusing to picture him in his lonely bed in the big house, gnashing his teeth in frustration.

Soon the holidays were over and the three of us were back at Oxford. I was reading History and I'd taken my examinations at the end of the Michaelmas term. But Ramsey was studying Jurisprudence—he'd deliberately opted not to read Politics, Philosophy, and Economics, because he fancied earning some decent money at the Bar whilst he climbed the Labour Party's greasy pole—and Law Moderations took place at the end of Hilary term. Ramsey had won a scholarship and was regarded as far and away the outstanding member of the group of six young lawyers. But he had trouble with Roman Law; Gaius and Justinian were dirty words, and he didn't have much time for criminal law. He had no intention of working at the criminal Bar. "The real money," he told me more than once, "is in the commercial field." I suppose he saw it, too, as an opportunity to exploit his flair for drama.

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I'd taken my own studies seriously, although I was beginning to wonder if Jurisprudence might have been more interesting, for Roman Law seemed to me to have more intellectual appeal than Ramsey would concede. But most of our friends concentrated on having a good time. Ramsey, though, was different. He had never known failure. The exams didn't matter; the results made no contribution to the final degree and he was confidently expected to get a First. But he was intent on making sure that he did well and the demands of the weekly essay meant that he began to see a little less of Leanne than in the past. From time to time, when he was in the St. Cross Building at a lecture or ploughing through the Institutes, she would come round to see me for tea and crumpets. Shades of Brideshead, I used to think to myself. Sometimes we talked about Ramsey, sometimes about politics, sometimes we speculated whether he might one day become prime minister. As often, we said little and simply listened to Dizzy Gillespie on my ageing turntable. I enjoyed those afternoons more than I can say. Naturally, I behaved myself. It was not simply a question of loyalty. I was quite sure in my own mind that, whatever tiffs Leanne and Ramsey might have from time to time, she felt no stirring of sexual desire where I was concerned. On the contrary, with me she felt safe. Whatever fantasies I might have entertained in the darkness of my cold little room in the small hours, I was content with what I had. I was determined, above all, not to exhibit any of my characteristic gaucherie. I would not make any move which might jeopardise my friendship either with Ramsey or Leanne.

As the examinations approached, Ramsey talked about the celebrations that would take place once they were over. He asked Leanne if she would come up to Cumbria again, but she told him that she was due to spend a month in Germany, returning to England just a few days before Trinity Term. She had a long-standing pen-friend who lived in West Berlin, in a flat just across the way from the Wall.

"Amazing," Ramsey said. "Hey, can I come?"

Leanne frowned. "I don't think so. Ute's not much interested in boys. She's quiet. A bit like Tim here, if you like. She's not much of a one for going out to the bars and clubs."

"No problem. She doesn't have to be interested in me, does she? But I don't see why I can't tag along."

"No, Ramsey," she said quietly. "It's not on."

And that was that. Ramsey went into a sulk and the subject wasn't discussed again. Law Moderations came and went, and he and I returned to the northwest for the vacation. I saw rather less of him than I had done at Christmas. My father was working on his latest book, the prime purpose of which was to establish that Crippen was innocent of everything other than stupidity and adul-

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tery, and he engaged me to undertake some of the legwork. I had to make a number of trips down to London, although I never did manage to convince myself that the death of Cora Crippen gave rise to one of the great miscarriages of justice.

With one thing and another, therefore, about ten days had elapsed since my last evening in a Keswick pub with Ramsey when a knock came on the door of our cottage.

"Will you get that?" my mother called from the cellar. "Your dad's in his study, fretting about arsenic, and I'm unloading the tumble drier."

I abandoned my perusal of *The Prince,* muttering some smart remark about sexual stereotyping, and went to answer the door. Outside on the step were two hefty men, both a few years older than myself. They were police officers, they said, and showed me their identification.

"Timothy Nicklin?"

"That's right."

"May we come in?"

"What's this all about?" My mind was racing. Had my little fiddle over the rail ticket for my last trip to Euston been discovered?

"It's about Ramsey Gillott. He's a friend of yours, we understand."

"Ramsey? Yes, of course. My best friend." I stared at them. "Why? What's happened?"

"I'm afraid," said one of the detectives, who might easily have passed for an all-in wrestler, "that he is missing, believed drowned."

Tape 918—side A, August 8

Two days to go before the Boss leaves Antigua. He will be making a couple of goodwill calls, one in Delhi, the other in Capetown. He has developed a taste for the international stage, it has to be said. Perhaps it comes to all great leaders, to see themselves as they hope posterity will perceive them, as statesmen of stature.

Back at home, Benjamin gave an interview to the *Independent* today. It wasn't exactly disloyal—but, well, it was very Benjamin. He called at midday and left a mesage on my answering machine. I think I'll leave it for the time being.

As for the rest of the news, it's all silly season stuff. Except for the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Alpert have given a press conference, appealing for more information about Lucy's movements since she arrived in the Lake District. Things are not looking good. My heart can't sink much further (if that's not an unfortunate choice of metaphor). But what can I do? I feel so helpless.

Twenty-four hours after the police broke the news, I was still struggling to absorb it. Ramsey had been so full of life that I found

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it almost impossible to conceive of his death. He always had about him an air of invulnerability. To me, it was as if he had enjoyed a kind of immortality.

"There must be some mistake," I said to Leanne. We were sitting in the corner of the lounge of a small pub in Keswick, a couple of miles from my home.

"I don't think so," she whispered.

I had telephoned her as soon as the police left. Stunned by what I told her, she had announced an intention to travel north at once. She booked into a little bed-and-breakfast place down the road from where I lived. Ramsey's people had, as Leanne said, enough to cope with as they tried to come to terms with what had happened.

"Who telephoned the police?" she asked.

"They don't know. Someone dialled nine-nine-nine at around eleven o'clock and said he'd seen a young man in the cove earlier that evening. It's a quiet place, not far from Grange. The beach had been deserted except for this one person, heading towards the sea. The description he gave fits Ramsey, by the way. He watched as Ramsey undressed and left his clothes on the shore."

"Folded?" Leanne asked sharply.

Despite everything, I laughed. I could guess what was going through her mind. A glimmer of suspicion, a flicker of hope. But I had to snuff it out. "No, Ramsey wasn't about to break the habit of a lifetime and leave everything nice and tidy. They were left in a jumble at the water's edge. Then he walked into the waves—and simply disappeared from sight."

She shivered and, instinctively, I put my arm around her. She snuggled closer and, in the chastest way, I held her close to me. We needed to comfort each other.

"What did this man do?"

"As far as I can gather, he was pretty horrified. Scared, too, I guess. The current there is notorious, so the police say. It was as if Ramsey deliberately set out to drown himself."

"The clothes are his?"

"Oh yes. That's how the police got on to his identity so quickly. There was a massive search. Coastguards, air-sea rescue, you name it. But there's been no trace so far."

We were both silent for a while. I was thinking of the damage that the sea water can do to the body of a human being. I couldn't help flinching. Somehow I guessed Leanne's mind was working on much the same lines.

She swallowed. "And this man—the man who telephoned—he didn't give his name? Why would that be?"

"The police said that this cove is a haunt for courting couples. More than likely this chap's a Peeping Tom. But he saw something he didn't expect."

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"A suicide . . ." she breathed. I could feel her body trembling against mine.

"We can't be sure he's dead."

She shook her head. "It's more than forty-eight hours since he went into the water, Tim. I know he can be theatrical, but he wasn't doing it for fun. How was he to know some creepy bloke would be out there snooping? He meant to die."

I sighed. "I suppose . . . you may be right."

"But why, Tim? Why would he do something like this?"

"God knows. The police asked the same question, of course. And I've not stopped interrogating myself ever since they left. I've had a word with his mum and dad. Naturally, they're shell-shocked. They do say he'd seemed a bit preoccupied, but they didn't realise there was anything to worry about. He'd mentioned that he was gloomy about his performance in Law Mods, but they didn't read anything into that. Ramsey has never failed an exam in his life."

"And me?" The big brown eyes stared into mine. "Did they say anything about Ramsey and me?"

I shifted my position, eased my arm away from her. To cover my embarrassment, I coughed several times.

"Well?" she demanded. "Did they? Did they?"

I took a breath. "He'd been a bit pissed off, according to his mother. Apparently he'd been expecting a card from you in West Berlin."

She closed her eyes. "I never wrote to him."

"I'd asked him how you were getting on with your pen-pal," I said quickly, mortified to see her cheeks crimsoning with guilt. "He said all right, or words to that effect. He never let slip to me that he was bothered that you hadn't been in touch."

"Well, he wouldn't, would he?" she demanded. "Ramsey's always revelled in the limelight. And in being hero-worshipped by you, Tim. Sorry, that sounds mean. But it's true, isn't it? He likes to lord it over you. Glamorous Ramsey. The supreme overachiever."

There was a cynicism in her tone which shocked me. "I'm not sure . . ." I began.

"Listen," she said, "he wouldn't want you to think that things had cooled between him and me."

I frowned. "Had they?"

She bent her head. In a muffled voice, she said, "We'd been going through a sticky patch, you might say. I suppose most couples do at some stage. I'm not the easiest person in the world to get on with, I'm the first to admit that. I'd kind of hinted to him at the end of term that perhaps we ought to ease off. Maybe not think of ourselves as a couple. We're still young, it's good to have a bit of space. I said all that, but he didn't seem to take it in."

"I see," I said after a pause.

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"Oh God," she said, as tears started to edge down her cheeks. "Don't look at me like that, Tim. You make me feel like a murderess."

"Sorry," I said and put my arm back around her. She didn't resist.

Later, I walked her back to the place where she was staying. She had a late-night key. To my astonishment, when I said goodbye, she murmured, "Would you like to come in for a bit?"

I didn't know what to say. She was looking at the ground, not at me. As I tried to make sense of her question, it struck me that if I made an excuse and left, she would never ask again. This was an extraordinary night. We had both suffered a bereavement; it was a shared loss. We needed each other.

"Well," I hesitated. "If you don't mind."

Without another word, she unlocked the door and led me upstairs. As if in a dream, I followed her up the uncarpeted stairs, afraid that the sound of my nervous footsteps would awake the landlady.

Later, when Leanne screamed, I did not know whether it was out of pleasure or pain.

Tape 918, side B— August 9

If the papers are to be believed, Shaun is finished. The rumour mill is in full swing. Apparently, there's a story doing the rounds in Fleet Street. Nothing to do with women, this time. It's money, and it's serious. I ought to be cock-a-hoop, but somehow I don't feel able to concentrate on anything. Except the fate of Lucy Alpert.

There's been a sighting. A week ago, she was seen by a family of Japanese tourists who had been visiting Keswick. On a trip to the stone circle at Castlerigg, they came across her and asked if she would use their camera to take a photograph of them. They exchanged pleasantries with her, it seems, and she said something about staying in the town for a day or two. The police have announced they are going to concentrate their enquiries in the area. Oh God, oh God, oh God. It's as bad as it could be.

When we met again the next day, we were both subdued. We'd arranged to have a bite of lunch in a small cafeteria near the shops, but it was like a conversation between distant acquaintances. I suppose that both of us had an acute awareness that we had betrayed Ramsey. Her lover, my friend. Yet I could not feel regret. I had been initiated and life would never be the same again. The virginity which had hung around my neck like an albatross was gone forever. I was a man.

As for Leanne, her thoughts were impossible to read. We talked about inconsequential things. Ramsey was scarcely mentioned. The following Thursday we were due back at Oxford, but it didn't

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seem right to discuss the forthcoming term. So much lay ahead of us that had now been denied to Ramsey.

When I'd paid the bill, Leanne said, "I suppose I'd better think about getting back home. There's nothing more I can do here. I never hit it off with his parents and I think they blame me for . . . for what happened."

"That's barmy!"

"It's only natural," she said. "I didn't realise how much he cared. Maybe if I did, I'd have spent the last few weeks here, not in Germany."

I gritted my teeth. Ridiculous though it might be, I felt a sudden spurt of jealousy. Even in death, even after what we had shared the previous evening, she still belonged to him. Suddenly, I was seized by the urge to forget about Ramsey. He was dead now. Gone. I had to get along without him. The same was true of Leanne. Who could tell what the future held for us?

But one thing was for sure. I mustn't let Ramsey's ghost come between us.

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm setting off in an hour. My luggage is all packed."

"You could stay with us," I said urgently. I didn't want to lose her. I was afraid that, once she left, I would never be able to rekindle the flame that had burned between us the night before.

She shook her head. "No, Tim. You already know, I'm someone who needs a bit of space. But don't worry. I'll see you soon."

"Leanne . . ."

She touched my hand. "Don't worry, Tim. I won't—forget."

With that, I had to be content. The rest of the day passed in a blur. So much had happened so quickly. I still found it difficult to understand Ramsey's reckless act of self-destruction, but I told myself that there was no point in trying to understand it. What is done can never be undone. I must look forward, not back. And the simple truth was that Leanne had liberated me. I felt free, for the first time in my life. I was exhilarated, even though I never even stopped to ask myself: "Free of what?"

That evening, I went to bed early. My parents were solicitous. They knew that my life had always revolved around Ramsey's and were inclined to treat me as an invalid. It wasn't an uncongenial experience, being waited on hand and foot. I couldn't get to sleep, though. My mind was too active. I was anticipating Oxford in Trinity, daring to hope that Leanne was telling the truth when she promised that she would not forget. Imagining a term spent with her, morning, noon, and night.

A sound roused me from my pleasurable, drowsy imaginings. It was rather like something from a child's Enid Blyton thriller, when gravel is thrown against a window to attract attention. I got

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out of bed and peered down into the back garden. Someone was standing there, waving at me. A familiar figure, yet now a wholly unexpected visitor.

"Yes!" Ramsey hissed. "It's me!"

Tape 919, side A—August 10

The Boss returns on the late flight this evening. The speculation about the reshuffle is now unbearable. I've stopped taking calls from journalists. If anyone asks, I have to take refuge in anodyne phrases about willingness to serve in whatever capacity where one might be thought able to help.

In any event, I'm too preoccupied to give a thought to my future prospects. Well, that's something I never expected to say, and yet, at this most crucial moment, it happens to be true. Extraordinary.

Another witness has come forward. Someone who saw Lucy Alpert camping out near Derwent Water. She left her tent there without any explanation. I fear that the explanation is obvious. What happens next is equally easy to predict.

"Coming down?" Ramsey hissed. "I don't want anyone else to see me."

My thoughts were in disarray, but I stumbled into some clothes and hurried downstairs as quickly as I could. My parents had already gone to bed. They both took sleeping pills, so there wasn't much danger of disturbing them, but even so I tiptoed down the steps, feeling like a criminal in my own home.

Ramsey was lounging against the wooden toolshed at the side of the patio.

"Surprised to see me?" he asked as I approached.

"What on earth . . . ?"

He stepped over a spade that my father had carelessly left outside the shed. "Sorry if I frightened you, mate. But it had to be done. I simply couldn't take anyone into my confidence. Not that I didn't trust you. But I wanted you to react as if I really had decided to top myself."

"I don't understand."

"I called the police myself, of course. I've never dialled nine-nine-nine before. Gave me quite a buzz, actually. Even though the report of my death was somewhat exaggerated."

"But they had the air-sea rescue out," I said, trying in vain to make sense of it all.

"Yeah, pretty dramatic, eh?"

"You'll be prosecuted! What about the waste of police time?"

He shook his head. "Okay, it was a bit naughty, I suppose. But it was a good hoax, all the same."

"But why? Why did you do this—this crazy thing?"

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Ramsey tapped the side of his nose. "Take it from me, Tim. Faint heart never won fair lady."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Leanne, of course. The lovely Leanne. See, it's like this. She's been slipping away from me. I wanted her to realise how much she means to me. Oh, I know I've had my share of women in the past. But this is different, believe me. With Leanne, it's for keeps. Yet she didn't seem able to cotton on to that. I've given her a shock now. She must realise I can't live without her. My idea is, I'm going to propose the next time I see her. Don't expect an answer right away, of course. You'd better be around yourself, mate. Handy with the smelling salts. But my bet is, when she comes round, she'll say yes. Would you like to be my best man?"

For a moment I stared at him. At this distance of time, I can't be sure exactly what went through my mind. Something to do with the loss of Leanne—and I saw that, despite everything, I was about to lose her to him. Something to do with the loss of my own life. It had taken me so long to escape his shadow. Now he wanted to consign me to the darkness again.

I wasn't thinking rationally, that much is for certain. There was no careful calculation of percentages. The most deterrent penal regime in the world would have had no effect on what I did next. It was instinct. Sheer bloody instinct.

I picked up my father's spade, lifted it as if endowed with unnatural strength, and smashed it against Ramsey's skull. Once, twice, three times.

To make sure.

Tape 919, side B—August 11

My name is in all the papers this morning. I'm the hot tip for promotion. Shaun is finished, everyone can see that. It's the day I've dreamed of, worked towards for so many years. Hence my taped diaries, so patiently compiled for the benefit of future biographers.

And yet all I can think of is the search for Lucy Alpert. Will they find her body quickly? Or will the scuba divers first discover whatever remains of Ramsey Nicklin?

I can't remember much about what happened afterwards. I was functioning on auto-pilot, whatever subconscious motivating force helps us to protect ourselves in times of the gravest crisis. I had an old banger which was barely roadworthy and, once I'd wrapped Ramsey's bloody corpse in sacking and weighted it with stones I'd taken from a pile in the garden, I drove to the quiet spot where Father kept a little boat moored. I lugged my cargo along the grassy path and dumped it into the boat, then rowed out to the middle of the lake before tossing my friend into the cold, unforgiving water.

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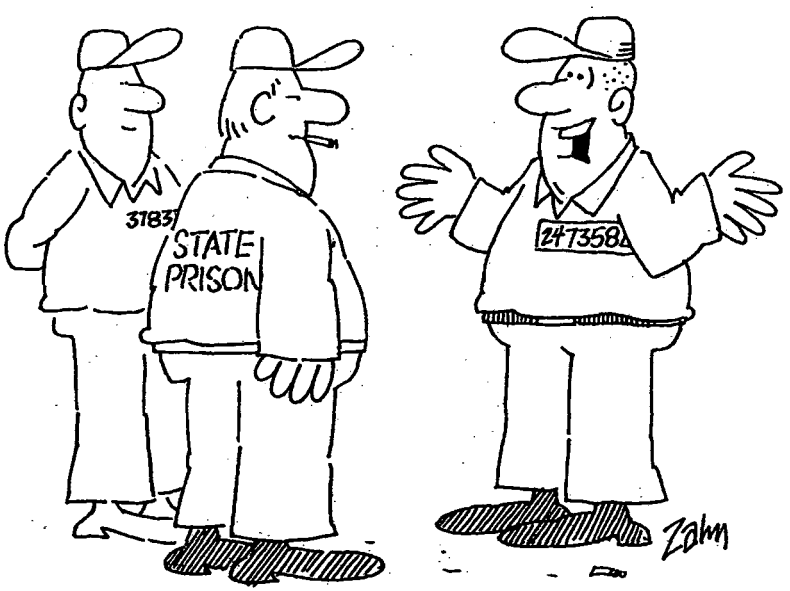
Tape 920, side A—August 12

The call came five minutes ago. Would I be able to call at Number 10 at two o'clock? I mumbled something which no doubt was taken as gratified assent.

I shan't be there, of course. It would be quite wrong. It ought to be Ramsey Nicklin who is appointed as Home Secretary, not me. Leanne should be by his side in Whitehall, not mine. We're in enough trouble already for saying one thing and doing another. Even the Boss would struggle to explain it away when the minister responsible for criminal justice was charged with the murder of the poor bastard who has just—it was on the news moments after the latest on the reshuffle—been dredged up from the bottom of Derwent Water. I think I'll opt for the old-fashioned way out. Doing the decent thing. It's gone out of vogue lately, but I really can't see myself being rehabilitated after a brief spell of purdah on the back benches. Even if the Boss commends the dignity of my departure from office and sympathises with my one unfortunate lapse of judgment. No, I fear it's the glass of whisky in the study and, since I don't possess a pearl-handled revolver, a suitably conclusive overdose of paracetemol. I owe it to Ramsey. The time's come for the debt to be paid. After all, I stole more than his wife. I stole his life. ●



"A VICTIMLESS CRIME? WHAT'S THE FUN IN THAT?"

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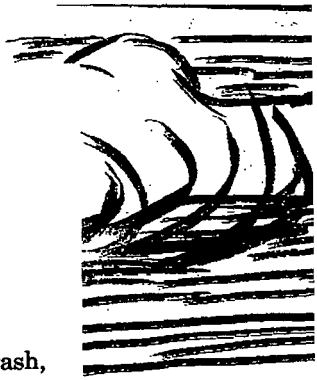
Suffering from winter's cold? Turn your thoughts to a day at the beach....

BEACH-HEAD

by Katherine H. Brooks



Old Henry Pease, with aching knees,
sat down to watch the Sox,
Reflecting on the symmetry
of ocean, sky, and rocks.
He'd mowed the lawn, removed the trash,
applied the rake with zest,
And now he thought he'd settle down
to get a little rest.
Poor Henry Pease. He'd tried and tried,
and never been allowed
To chat with chums, or twiddle thumbs,
or watch a passing cloud.

"You said you'd take me to the beach,"
he heard his wife declare.
"The heat's so bad I'll soon go mad,
or melt, for all you care.
I'm ready now!" she ordered
in a voice the dead could hear,
And Henry Pease uncrossed his knees,
and put aside his beer.
He thought of all the rounds he'd lost
in former family tussles.
She'd have her way. They'd spend the day
among the crabs and mussels.

They walked the road together
till the beach came into view.
She griped about the weather—
a pebble in her shoe—
Then dug a trench beside the shore
and placed herself inside.
"Now cover me with sand, you bore,
and keep it wet," she cried.

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He covered up her limbs, and when
the mound had reached her chest,
She raised her head, and brashly said,
"Now cover up the rest!"

He paused, and flashed a naughty smile
that broadened to a grin.
Then, quite unplanned, he stuffed with sand
her mouth, and capped her chin.
Her pupils bulged. Her eyebrows rose.
Her nostrils quivered, too.
He slapped a handful up her nose,
and blotted out her view.
She lost, at last, the strength to thrash,
and henceforth ceased to care.
"I guess she's dead," her husband said,
and covered up her hair.

Then, patting down the sand a bit,
to make a smooth impression—
So none who passed would know the vast
extent of his transgression—
He carved, in touching afterthought,
a sleeping woman's face,
Aware the tide would shortly hide
her final resting place.
"A fitting epitaph," he said.
"You're cool at last, my dear."
And Henry Pease got off his knees,
went home, and drank his beer.

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I Saw Mommy Killing Santa Claus

by Ed McBain

As knowledgeable mystery readers know, Ed McBain is the most famous pseudonym of writer Evan Hunter. Over the years, Evan Hunter and Ed McBain—though one person—have forged distinct writing careers, but in January 2001, S& S will publish *Candyland,* the first "collaboration" between them. The book begins with an Evan Hunter-like tale of a man obsessed, then switches to an 87th precinct probe of a murder in which the protagonist of part one is a suspect. Don't miss it!

Christmas Eve at the Mysterious Book Shop is not normally a crowded time. We'll get the usual rush of last-minute shoppers eager to find something a distant mystery-reading uncle or aunt might enjoy, but if there are a dozen shoppers still on the premises when we close at five o'clock, that's a lot.

I had been working there for a bit more than two years now, and I must say I liked the job a lot. I have always loved books—in fact, my previous job had been at a bookstore—but there is something especially intense about the feelings mystery lovers share. Working at The Mysterious, I often felt as if I were performing a public service. Matching readers with the perfect books for them became something of an obsession. This was especially true at Christmastime, when I knew the book would be a gift and when I could imagine the delight of unwrapping it on Christmas morning. At Christmastime, I truly felt like one of Santa's helpers, listening to a shopper telling me his cousin liked "puzzles, you know, but not violence," listening to yet another shopper telling me her brother-in-law liked to read "someone by the name of Leonard Elmore? Does that sound familiar?"

There were perhaps nine or ten people in the shop at four-fifteen that Christmas Eve, some of them browsing upstairs, a

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handful scattered around downstairs, none of them looking particularly harried or rushed despite the fact that we would be closing in forty-five minutes. I always hate to tell people we'll be closing because it sounds as if we're shoving them out into the cold, when instead we should be offering them a noggin of grog. I hadn't seen the little boy when he came into the shop, and so I was surprised to see him coming down the spiral staircase from above. We get a lot of kids in the store, accompanying their mothers or fathers, and most of them are well-behaved, perhaps because they sense the sort of reverence for mysteries I mentioned a moment ago. This one seemed to be about eight, a skinny little kid wearing a blue stocking cap over blond hair, a blue ski parka over darker blue corduroys, and L.L. Bean boots. He sidled down the staircase with one hand on the banister, watching his own hand as it glided downstairs, and then he smiled somewhat shyly and drifted toward the bookshelves, where he began browsing titles. He finally pulled an illustrated book from one of the shelves, leafed through the pages, and then put it back neatly in its slot.

"Hi," I said. "Can I help you?"

"No, thank you," he said.

"Where's your mommy?" I asked.

"Still upstairs," he said, and glanced toward the front door as if he might suddenly bolt.

"That's okay," I said. "Feel free to browse."

"Thanks," he said, and went hesitantly to the bookshelves again.

"Do you like to read mysteries?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"Which ones are your favorites?"

"The ones where a kid solves them."

A woman standing at one of the shelves smiled when she heard this and then asked if I thought Lawrence Block might be good for a woman who'd just passed a kidney stone.

"Or would Donald Westlake be better?" she asked.

"You can't miss with either one," I said.

"Maybe I ought to take one of each," she said. "What do you think?"

"Did she pass *two* kidney stones?" I asked, and smiled.

"I'm not sure how many she passed, she's my husband's supervisor."

"In that case, I wouldn't take any chances," I said.

"If *you'd* just passed a kidney stone, which of these would *you* take?"

"They're both very good," I said. "You can't go wrong."

"Do you think Bergdorf's is still open?" she asked, and put both books back on the counter and walked out.

"Why didn't she buy one?" the kid asked.

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"I don't know. Maybe she didn't trust me."
"She said she wanted two, then she didn't even take one."
"Well, she was trying to decide, I guess."
"What's a supervisor?"
"A boss."
"Are you a boss?"
"No, I just work here."
"What's your name?"
"Alan," I said. "What's yours?"
"Max. What's a kidney stone?"
"A stone the kidney manufactures."
"Why?"
"I have no idea."
"Do *you* believe in Santa Claus?" he asked.

There was suddenly an intensely serious look on his face. I had learned a long time ago that you can't ever make the mistake of believing kids aren't at least as serious as grownups. I didn't for a moment believe Max's question ranked up there with peace in the Middle East or pollution of the environment, but the look on his face told me at once that he was having very grave reservations about the existence of the bearded man in the red suit.

"Do you believe in him?" I asked.
"I used to."
"When did you stop?"
"When he died," Max said.

A sandy-haired man wearing a Burberry trench coat walked over to me, a copy of the latest Janet Evanovich mystery in his hand.

"Is this a pseudonym?" he asked.
"I don't think so.
"Evanovich?"
"I don't think so, sir."
"It's not one of Evan Hunter's pseudonyms, is it?"
"No, that's her name. Janet Evanovich."
"'Cause I don't want to buy the book and then find out it's just another one of his goddamn pseudonyms."
"There's her picture and everything," I said.

The man looked at the picture on the back jacket.

"Is it a good book?"
"It's very good."
"It's for my daughter, who has no sense of humor."
"It'll make her laugh."
"*Nothing* makes her laugh."
"Try it," I said. "It's very funny. She's very funny."
"Where do I pay for it?" he said, though he was standing not

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three feet from the cash register. Max stepped out of his way as he turned. The serious look was still on his face.

"What makes *you* laugh?" I asked him.

"Dirty jokes," he said.

"What's your favorite dirty joke?"

"Mommy wouldn't want me to tell it."

"That's okay, she's upstairs."

"She'd find out," he said, and looked up into my face, his blue eyes wide. "If you knew Santa was dead," he asked, "would you still believe in him?"

"Santa can't be dead," I said.

"But he is."

"No, he isn't. Santa can't die."

"Why can't he?"

"Because he's magic. That's why you see him on every street corner at the same time."

"If I saw him die, then he can't be on *any* street corner at *all.*"

"Yes, but you couldn't have seen him die."

"But I did," the kid said.

"Excuse me," a man at my elbow said.

He was wearing a brown coat with velvet lapels. He was wearing a homburg. He was carrying a furled black umbrella. He had a neat little moustache under a somewhat bulbous nose.

"I'm looking for something called *The Poison Cookbook,*" he said. "Does that title ring a bell?"

"I'm not familiar with that title, no, sir."

"You're not?"

"Is it fiction or nonfiction?"

"It's a collection of recipes for poisoned dishes," he said.

"I don't believe we have such a book, sir."

"Isn't this a mystery book shop?"

"It is *The* Mysterious Book Shop, yes, sir."

"Then why don't you carry this book?"

"I don't think such a book exists, sir."

"Then how would I know the title?"

"I don't even think such a book would be legal, sir."

"Well, I certainly don't plan to kill anyone with it," he said.

"Santa Claus is dead, you know," Max told him solemnly.

"I'm afraid I don't care," the man said. "Are you positive you don't have this book? A friend of mine is *aching* to have it."

"I feel certain, sir."

The man looked down at Max and said, "You don't *still* believe in Santa Claus, do you? A big boy like you?"

"Not anymore," Max said.

"Good for you," the man said, and marched out of the shop.

It was almost four-thirty.

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"Listen," I said, "you have to stop telling people Santa Claus is dead."

"But he is."

"That's what you keep saying. But it might destroy their faith in this joyous holiday season, if you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry, but it's true."

"What'd you do, witness some accident on the street?"

"No."

"Did some street Santa get hit by a car or something?"

"No."

"Then what is it? What makes you think Santa Claus is dead?"

"I saw him die."

"Uh-huh."

A blond woman coming down the spiral staircase said, "When I was a little girl, I saw Santa die, too." She was wearing a sable coat that dusted her ankles, a matching sable hat tilted rakishly over one eye.

"You did?" Max asked.

"Yes, little boy," she said. "Where do I pay for these?"

"At the register," Max said, and nodded toward it. "Where was this?" he asked.

"At Macy's," she said.

"How old were you?" he asked.

"Never ask a woman her age," she said. "I was six."

"What happened?"

"I was sitting on Santa's lap when he had a fatal heart attack."

"That must have been *horrible* for you," I said.

"Yes," she said drily. "I always felt I'd caused it somehow."

"But you didn't, of course."

"Well, I'm not actually sure. I was a pretty sexy little thing, you know." She winked at me, turned to Max, and said, "The point is, little boy, we *all* have Santas die on us sooner or later, so I wouldn't take it too much to heart, really. Do you gift wrap?" she asked the cashier.

I knelt beside Max and said, "You see? That nice lady thinks *she* saw him die, too, but of course that can't be. He's still everywhere you look."

"Not anymore," Max said. "He's been dead for half an hour."

Which was when Rosie Prochak came into the shop.

"*Who's* been dead for half an hour?" she asked.

"Santa Claus," Max said.

"Oh," Rosie said, and dismissed the notion with a wave of her hand. "Hello, Alan," she said. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Rosie."

Rosie is a Detective/Second Grade working out of the Fifth Precinct downtown. She is five feet seven inches tall, with very

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long legs and a wonderful chest and red hair and green eyes that make her look more Irish than Polish—which I think she is, but have never asked. You can set your clock by Rosie's arrival times because she usually takes the subway uptown after her shift ends and spends an hour or so browsing the shop before going home to her three cats. Rosie hates police procedurals. She has told me in confidence that not anybody writing about cops ever gets it right. She hates cat mysteries, too. She says she has never in her lifetime known a cat who solved a homicide. Never. Not even her own three sterling specimens. There is always an air of excitement about Rosie. Maybe it's because she's the only cop I know who wears expensive perfume. Maybe it's because she carries an automatic pistol in her tote bag.

"You know we close at five tonight," I said.

"I need a rare edition costing fifty thousand dollars," she said.

"We'll stay open."

"Actually, I need something for my grandmother. She's in the hospital."

"Did she just pass a stone?" I asked.

"No, she fell getting out of the bathtub. Have you got something that costs a buck ninety-five?"

"Santa got stabbed," Max said.

"What kind of mysteries does she like?" I asked.

"Nothing with cops or cats."

"I remember."

"What's this with Santa?" she asked Max.

"He got stabbed."

"Gee, is that right?" Rosie asked. "How do you know that?"

"I saw him."

"Yeah?" she said, and looked at him curiously. "Where'd you see this?"

"Upstairs," he said.

"So when are you due back?" I asked her.

"The job, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Monday morning. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Uh-huh," Rosie said, and her eyes met mine and I could suddenly smell her expensive perfume and I wondered what kind of lingerie tall redheaded detective ladies wore under their skirts. Max was looking up at both of us.

"Maybe you ought to go tell your mommy we'll be closing in half an hour, huh?" I said.

He seemed puzzled.

"Your mother?" I said. "Upstairs?" I said, and winked at him and nodded toward the spiral staircase. He nodded back and began

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climbing upward. As he went, he glanced over his shoulder toward the front door, and again there was that apprehensive, almost frightened look in his blue eyes.

"So what's this all at once?" Rosie asked.

Not for nothing was she a detective.

"What do you mean?"

"You want to take me out or something?"

"Yes, I do."

"So ask me."

"I'm asking."

"When?"

"How about tonight?"

"Tonight's Christmas Eve."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I ought to go see Grandma."

"See me instead."

"What time?"

"Eight?"

"What'll we do?"

"You like to dance?"

"I love to dance."

"Good," I said.

Rosie grinned.

"Yeah, good," she said. "What's with the little kid? Have you got a stabbed Santa Claus upstairs?"

"Nope."

"You got *any* kind of Santa Claus upstairs?"

"Nope."

"Then what's he talking about?"

"Who knows?"

"I hate spooky kids," Rosie said. "So what can I get Grandma?"

"A bottle of scotch."

"I think she'd prefer that to a book, you want the truth. How's the new Grafton?"

"Excellent. Let me get it for you."

"I'll browse," she said.

I started up the spiral staircase, looked back down at her, and smiled. She smiled back. I was thinking Santa Claus *can't* be dead. Not if he dropped Rosie Prochak into my lap on Christmas Eve.

Max was looking at a book he'd taken down from one of the Sherlock Holmes shelves on the second floor. A man wearing a red parka open over a red and black plaid shirt was standing beside him, leafing through another book. There were three women up here, in addition to Daisy, who worked for us. I wondered which of them was Max's mother. The man who looked as if he'd just come

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back from a hunting trip spotted me as I came onto the floor and said, "Excuse me, do you work here?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"What would a first edition of *Hound of the Baskervilles* cost?" he asked.

"That's not a first edition you've got there, sir."

"I realize that. But what *would* a first edition cost? Ballpark."

"Anywhere from three thousand to eight thousand dollars," I said, "depending on its condition. Were you interested in seeing something like that, sir?"

"I might be."

"Otto's in his office, he'd be the one to talk to about that."

"Eight thousand dollars, huh?"

"Shall I tell him you'd like to see him?"

"Maybe next Christmas," the man said, and went down the staircase, sighing heavily.

Daisy signaled me over. She was a woman in her forties, I guessed, wearing what looked like a French butcher's apron, blue, over a tidy skirt and blouse. She peered at Max over her little Benjamin Franklin spectacles, and asked, "Who's the kid?"

"Max," I said.

"Is his mother downstairs?"

"I thought his mother was up here."

"No, he wandered up here alone."

"When?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes ago? Told me Santa was dead."

"Yeah," I said.

"You think he's okay?"

"I don't know," I said.

I plucked the new Grafton from the shelf and went over to where Max was standing, seemingly absorbed in Sherlockiana.

"Max," I said, "didn't you tell me your mother was upstairs?"

"Yes?" he said cautiously.

"Which one of these ladies is your mother, Max?"

Max looked them over.

"Why do you want to know who my mother is?" he asked.

"Because you're a little kid, Max, and if you're out at night all alone . . ."

"She's not here, okay?"

"She's not here in the shop?"

"No."

"You told me she was upstairs."

"Upstairs *home.*"

Daisy was watching us intently. I was wondering if I should go downstairs and tell Rosie there was a lost little kid in the shop.

"Where's home?" I asked.

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"Fifty-fifth Street."

"You live on Fifty-fifth Street?"

He nodded.

"Do you know which building you live in, Max?"

He nodded again.

"How'd you get here?" I asked him.

"I walked."

"Well, we're going to walk right back, Max. Come on, I'm taking you home."

"I don't *want* to go home," he said.

"Max, listen to me . . ."

"No!" he said.

A girl wearing a short, fake-leopard coat, black slacks tucked into knee-high boots, a long green scarf that trailed almost to her knees, and sunglasses, indoors, on Christmas Eve, came over to where I was kneeling before Max. "Excuse me," she said. "Are you this boy's father?"

She was nineteen or so, I guessed, with frizzed hair that echoed the tawny color of the fake fur. In her right hand, she was holding a copy of a used Jonathan Kellerman paperback, which presumably gave her the authority to question me about adult-child relationships.

"It's okay," I said, "I work here."

"No, it's *not* okay," she said. "You're terrifying him."

"Miss," I said, "this really is not your affair. I know this boy, it's all right."

"Do you know this man?" she asked Max.

"No," he said.

"Then let him go," she said.

"Miss . . ."

"Let him go this *instant* or I'll call the police!"

In the next instant, there was no longer an instant. In the next instant, Max was on the spiral staircase. "Police!" the girl yelled, and I yelled "Rosie, *stop* him!" But Max was already down the stairs and across the shop and had just reached the front door when it burst open to let in a blast of wintry air and a tall blond woman in a blue cloth coat.

"So *there* you are!" she said.

Max stopped dead in the center of the shop.

He seemed about to run back toward the staircase, away from the woman who now closed the door behind her and smiled at him, her blue eyes echoing his, the facial resemblance unmistakable.

"You had me scared to death," she said, and opened her arms to him, but he did not go to her. Instead, and surprisingly, he went to Rosie and buried himself in her skirts. The girl with the sun-

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glasses and the frizzed hair was just coming down the steps, still yelling "Police!" when Rosie told her, "It's okay, miss," and showed her a gold and blue enameled shield which the blonde standing just inside the door now took in with a cool, measured look. The girl with the frizzed hair looked at the shield and said, "Are you sure you've got this under control here, Officer?"

"It's *Detective,*" Rosie said, and gave her a look that sent her scurrying out of the shop.

"Let's go home now, Max," the blonde said.

"Are you the boy's mother?" Rosie asked.

"Yes. Let's go, Max."

"I don't want to," Max said.

"Santa will be coming soon," she said. "It's Christmas Eve, Max."

The boy shook his head.

"Maa-aax," she said warningly, virtually singing the name.

"Santa's already been there," he said.

"Max, please don't try my . . . "

"Santa's dead," he said.

"All right, that's enough," she said, and reached for his arm. She was pulling him away from Rosie when he said, "You killed him, Mommy."

And now he told the story he'd been trying to tell in bits and pieces from the moment he'd entered the shop at a quarter to four this afternoon.

School had let out early for Christmas Eve. The bus had dropped him off on the corner of Fifty-fifth and Seventh, and he'd walked down the block to the brownstone he lived in, letting himself in with his own latchkey and then tiptoeing upstairs because sometimes his mother took naps in the afternoon. On the second floor of the building, the Christmas tree was ablaze with light in the living room. Max grinned as he walked past it, knowing that Santa would be here later tonight; he had spied on him last year, putting presents under the tree and then drinking the milk and eating the chocolate chip cookies Max had set out for him. He was climbing the steps to the third floor when he heard his mother shrieking at someone. He stopped dead on the staircase and looked up the steps to the landing above, and realized that the someone she was screaming at was Santa Claus, rushing down the hallway in his red suit and black boots and white beard and whiskers, big belly thrusting, red hat with white fur trim and a white fur pompom bouncing as he ran—what was he doing here so early?

And then Max saw his mother coming down the hall behind Santa. There was a pair of scissors in her hand. She kept slashing at the air with the scissors, screaming, until at last she caught up

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with him, just at the top of the stairs, just five or six feet above Max where he stood watching, terrified. The twin blades of the scissors caught Santa between the shoulder blades. He groped at the air with his open hands, and then fell to the floor, his eyes bulging. Max's mother straddled him where he lay on the floor, plunging the scissors into his back again and again, shrieking, "You son of a bitch!" with each deadly thrust. Blood spattered the hallway walls. Blood spattered his mother's face and hands.

Max turned and ran.

He ran down the stairs and out of the house, leaving the door open behind him, rushing out into the night, running blindly, running anywhere, finally seeing the bright lights of the shop and coming in where he thought he would be safe.

Now, in the six-o'clock stillness of the shop, police cars angled into the curb outside, dome lights flashing, Max's mother seemed oddly calm. Sitting in a chair near the cash register, her hands folded in the lap of the blue cloth coat, her blue eyes vacant, she told Rosie that she'd been married to Frank Prescott for twelve years, that he'd always been a wonderful father to little Max, a kind and generous man who merely *happened* to have a penchant for other women.

"I've known this for some time now," she said.

Her face was as still and as wan as a funeral mask. The pale hands in her lap were unmoving.

"I simply couldn't take it anymore," she said.

Rosie stood beside the chair, head bent, red hair partially falling over her face, listening, her focus intense. I realized all at once that this was the same concentration mystery readers brought to their passion. Rosie was that very rare individual, a cop who actually loved a good mystery. Totally absorbed, she listened . . .

There was afternoon sunlight slanting through the third-floor windows of the brownstone. Frank, slightly drunk after his office Christmas party, insisted on modeling the Santa Claus costume before Max got home from school. Raucously singing "Deck the halls with boughs of holly," he stood before the bathroom mirror, trying on the beard and the boots and the big belly. In the bedroom, Max's mother was going through his briefcase, a faithful, loving wife reduced to the role of sneak thief. She recognized the woman in the framed photograph at once, though she had never before seen her so exposed. The inscription was intimate, as utterly candid as the pose: "Come to me, Frank, I'm yours." It was signed "Sybil."

"Frank is a lawyer," she said now. "They work together in the same office. I knew she was the one all along."

It occured to me that she was still talking about him in the pre-

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sent tense. It occured to me that perhaps she didn't yet realize she'd stabbed her husband however many times in the back.

"There was a scissors in my sewing basket," she said. "He came out of the bathroom wanting to know how he looked. I told him, *'This* is how you look, you son of a bitch!' " and she suddenly demonstrated the motion, bringing her hand high above her head, her fist clutched around an imaginary pair of scissors, bringing the hand down again in a sharp plunging thrust. And then, just as suddenly, she folded her hands in her lap again and sat still and silent for what seemed the longest time.

"He got what he deserved," she said at last. "Mr. *Santa* Claus."

I suddenly remembered what the lady in the sable coat had told Max not an hour earlier.

The point is, little boy, we all *have Santas die on us sooner or later, so I wouldn't take it too much to heart really. Do you gift wrap?*

But who was going to tell little Max that it wasn't merely Santa who'd died tonight?

Who was going to look into his eight-year-old eyes and tell him *that?* ●

"GOOD GRIEF! WHEN HE COMES DOWN, I'M SURE HE'LL WRITE UP AN ACCIDENT REPORT THAT WON'T BE FAVORABLE TO ME."

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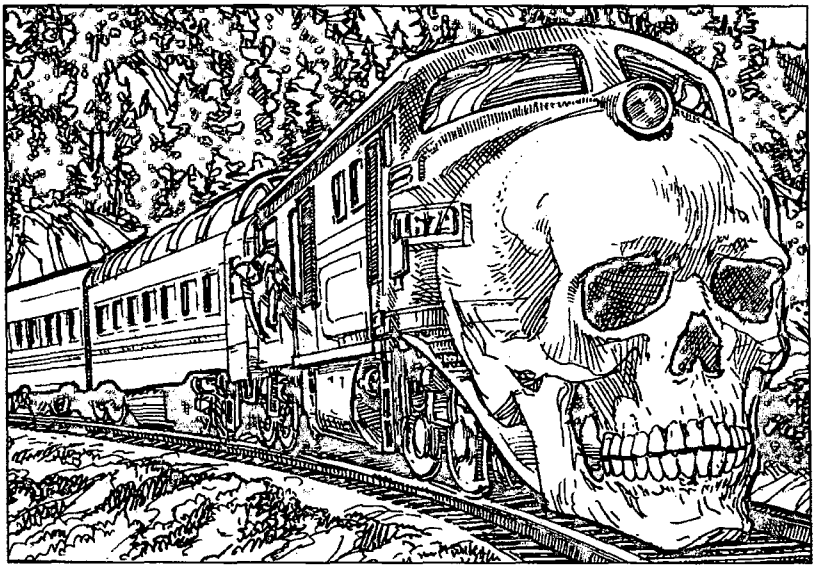

Art by Allen Davis

MURDER ON THE POLAR BEAR EXPRESS

by Peter Sellers

"Up in Fort Albany, in the middle of winter, you can sell a forty-ouncer for as much as nine hundred bucks."

Jack's eyes opened wide when the bearded man told them that. "Is that like gin or scotch or vodka or what?"

"Anything. Any forty-ouncer." The bearded man took a sip of coffee, raising the uncovered Styrofoam cup to his lips delicately as a defense against the rocking of the train. "And you can get twenty bucks for a twelve-ounce bottle of beer."

Rosemary shook her head. "It's hard to believe," she said. "You just don't think about smuggling in Canada. Not like that, anyway. I mean, you think about drug smuggling from South America and the Orient. Or cigarette smuggling across Lake Ontario from the States. But you don't think of smuggling liquor between two towns in the same province."

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The bearded man bent forward to take another sip, then pulled his head back as the car lurched violently. "Yeah, well, Fort Albany's dry and Moosonee ain't. So it happens," he said. "All the time. All winter, anyway."

Rosemary turned to stare out the window, watching the rain cascading down the glass. Jack and the bearded man continued talking about smuggling on the shores of James Bay.

"Why only in the winter?" Jack asked.

"Because there's a trail through the muskeg that runs from the north side of Moosonee all the way along the coast to the Fort. In the summer, you might make it with a four-wheel drive, but it'd be rough. But in the winter, when the trail gets covered with snow and ice, and it gets packed down hard, it's almost like it's paved. The smugglers can fill their trunks with booze and boot it up the coast."

"The police know it goes on?"

"Sure."

"And they don't stop it?"

The bearded man gave Jack an amused look and didn't say anything, switching his concentration to the cup of coffee.

The passenger car was the one closest to the engine and it was full. A few families, some young couples, and a large number of people who obviously belonged to a senior citizens' group. All of them making the excursion to Moosonee, just south of the southernmost tip of James Bay. Jack, Rosemary, and the bearded man were all travelling alone and so wound up sitting together in a small group of four seats—two facing forward and two back.

"The Polar Bear Express," says Peter Sellers, "runs every summer from the town of Cochrane, about 1,000 kilometers north of Toronto, up to Moosonee, about 8 miles south of James Bay. There are no roads into Moosonee, which was founded by traders of the Hudson's Bay Company in the late 1600s, so access is limited to rail, air, and water in the summer months." Which makes the train and its surrounds the perfect setting for a classical whodunit! ✝

Jack had been one of the last to climb on the train, racing through the rain just seconds before the whistle blew and the great yellow Ontario Northland engine began chugging northward from Cochrane on the four-and-a-half-hour trek to the end of the steel road.

From the window of his hotel, across the street from the station, he had watched the people waiting to board. Usually, all the passengers would stand in a ragged line strung along the edge of the

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platform, each close to the point where their designated car would stop. Not today, though. Today, most huddled in the shelter of the station overhang, trying to stay out of the rain that passed over in waves. For a time light and soft, then pelting down harder for several minutes, then mercifully lightening up again.

Others, either not so easily intimidated by a little water or anxious to make sure they got the best seats, stood by the track just as they would on a dry day. Most of them were obscured by umbrellas. Those without made the best of it by pulling up the hoods on Eddie Bauer jackets or turning down the brims on Tilly hats. Each person at the designated point for boarding their assigned car. Jack was supposed to be in Car One. At the front, separated from the engine by the club car, which, given the liquor laws in Ontario, would not be open for the morning trip north.

Jack didn't feel like standing in the rain, umbrella or not. Traveling by himself, he did not expect the luxury of sitting alone no matter when he boarded. The Polar Bear Express was too popular for that to happen often. Sometimes this bothered him, but not today. He was actually in a mood in which he looked forward to meeting new people. So he waited by the window in his room as long as possible. While the train pulled slowly into position. While the Ontario Northland officials scurried around getting everything set for boarding. And while the people pressed forward, eager to be out of the rain and settled.

Most of the passengers would be tourists, out for a one-day excursion and a quick breath of excitement. A leisurely trip to the frontier, a few hours wandering around looking at James Bay, seeing the ancient graveyard and other historical sites, then back on the train that evening for the return trip to Cochrane. Some, like Jack, would be going up for a longer period. Others would be locals, returning from a trip down south for whatever reason. There wouldn't be many of these, though. Usually they took the Little Bear, a combined freight and passenger train that ran all year from Cochrane to Moosonee.

The Polar Bear Express was merely a summer operation. With summer students providing commentary on passing points of interest, the train made its way up north. Jack would have preferred to take the Little Bear himself, but decided that using the Polar Bear Express would be good for a change.

When everyone else had boarded and departure was just minutes away, Jack picked up his single canvas bag and headed downstairs. He darted through the rain, across the road, and onto the train just before the porter took away the footstool and withdrew the steps.

When Jack climbed into the car, every mini-compartment of four seats was fully occupied. Until he came to the last two, farthest

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from the club car. In each set of four seats there were only two people. On the right, a couple Jack guessed to be in their sixties. On the left, a woman of perhaps thirty and a slightly older, heavily bearded man. They sat facing opposite directions, in seats kitty-corner to each other. It was immediately obvious that they were not travelling together.

The dark-haired woman was reading a book, while the bearded man was sprawled next to the window with his feet on the seat opposite. He was blowing away the steam from a cup of coffee.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" Jack asked.

The woman shook her head, glancing up briefly. "Not at all."

The bearded man just looked at Jack as if he might actually mind very much but didn't say a word. He didn't move his feet either, so Jack swung his pack onto the overhead rack and took the seat opposite the woman, next to the aisle.

No one said anything right away. Jack looked at the cover of the woman's book, a biography of Lenin, and wished he'd brought something to read. The bearded man ignored him and alternately blew on and sipped his coffee.

"My name's Jack," he said finally, out of boredom as much as a desire to be social.

The woman looked up from her book. "I'm Rosemary," she said.

They both glanced towards the bearded man in expectation of further social nicety, but he just looked back at them with amusement for an instant, then turned his gaze to the window.

"Have you ever been to Moosonee before, Rosemary?" Jack asked.

Rosemary shook her head. "I'm really looking forward to it. I understand it's beautiful. Have you been?"

"A couple of times. Yeah, it's beautiful. It's a little rough. Feels like a frontier town."

She closed her book. "What do the people up there do?"

Jack shrugged. "Some of them trap. A few run water-taxi services and ferry tourists and residents back and forth from Moosonee to Moose Factory Island. But that's only for a pretty short season. I guess there are stores and a couple of small hotels that must employ some people. Other than that, I have no idea."

"Some of them smuggle."

Jack and Rosemary both looked up, startled by the comment. It was the first sound they'd heard from the bearded man.

"Smuggle what?" Rosemary asked.

"Liquor," he said. And he told them all about it.

They had rolled north for perhaps twenty minutes when a young woman in an Ontario Northland uniform came into the car. As she walked past, Jack noticed her look at the bearded man. Her face

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showed recognition and then surprise, but the bearded man seemed not to have seen her at all. There was a slight hesitation in the woman's step, and then she carried on. Taking a position in the centre of the car, she announced in a loud, clear voice, "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome aboard the Polar Bear Express. My name is Amanda, and if you need anything or have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to ask. Before I tell you about some of the highlights to watch for on our trip, I'll just point out that the dining car is three cars that way." And she pointed at the door in the end of the car just past Jack, Rosemary, and the bearded man. "Just before you reach it, you will come to a counter where you can get hot and cold drinks as well as sandwiches and snacks. Our trip to Moosonee today will take about four and a half hours, and on the way we'll pass through some of the most beautiful country in Ontario . . ."

She continued on, talking about points of geographic and historic interest, but Jack paid no attention. He was thinking about the look that Amanda had given the bearded man. He looked up briefly and glanced at Rosemary, and he saw from her expression that she had noticed, too.

"I need another coffee," the bearded man said. He got up, brushing past Rosemary and Jack's knees roughly and without apology. They watched him walk towards the dining car, his gait keeping him balanced in the manner of someone who must ride the train a lot.

"He's something else," Jack said.

"Yes," said Rosemary. "But I'm not sure what."

"I can tell you." The woman seated directly across the aisle from Rosemary leaned towards them and said, "He's notorious." Then she nodded, and her husband did the same.

"Notorious in what way?" Rosemary asked, glancing quickly in the direction of the dining car to make sure the bearded man wasn't coming back.

The elderly man continued, "We don't have any proof, of course, but we think he's a smuggler himself. Or rather, the head of a ring of smugglers."

The woman, who must have been his wife, chirped in, "And there's a story that he killed a man. Drowned him on a fishing trip and dumped his body in the river."

"Really?" said Jack. "How do you know this?"

"My Robert is from Moosonee," she said, placing a hand proudly on her husband's arm. "He was born up there."

"Yes." Robert nodded. "My father was a minister there for many years. On Moose Factory Island. I grew up there. I spent several

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years there as a sergeant in the local OPP detachment, and I still know lots of people. Carolyn and I go back every year."

"What kind of factory did they have on the island?" Rosemary asked.

Robert and Carolyn chuckled. "Lots of people ask that question," Carolyn said. "But it wasn't that kind of a factory at all. The man who ran the fur-trading post on the island in the last century was known as the factor, and the building he lived in was the factory."

"Yes," Robert added, "like my father was a rector and we lived in the rectory."

"Ah, I see."

"Anyway, for decades I've watched the people who live in all those northern communities try to eke out a living, try to move ahead, and men like that fellow do everything possible to hold them back. Out of greed and utter meanness."

"That man sitting with you is just heartless," Carolyn said. "I'm so glad you're not traveling with him. You seem like such nice young people. But him! I wouldn't be sorry to hear that somebody killed him."

"Now, now, dear," Robert said, looking more amused than shocked.

"Well, you may not think that he deserves it, but at the very least, he really should be in the clink." Carolyn looked towards the dining car, seemed momentarily flustered, then whispered, "He's coming." Raising her voice again, she continued, "If this rain stops, you really must go out onto James Bay in one of the open freighter canoes. It's quite breathtaking, but it will, of course, be too rough now."

Rosemary shrugged. "I don't mind it a little rough."

"Neither do I," Jack said.

The bearded man stopped beside Rosemary and Jack and brushed past without waiting for them to move their legs. He didn't have a lid on his coffee cup, and Jack wondered how he managed it without spilling a drop.

"You want some lunch?" Jack asked.

Rosemary had been reading for the past twenty minutes while the bearded man seemed to be napping. Jack had been sitting trying not to stare at Rosemary, not to stare at the bearded man—who may not have been as soundly asleep as he appeared—and not to stare at Robert and Carolyn across the aisle. He wondered what he'd been thinking, getting on a train without something to read. Finally, he asked.

"Sure," she said. "That would be okay."

It wasn't much, but sometimes good things started small. They

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both stood up and the bearded man opened one eye. "Want to come get some lunch?" Jack asked.

The man just stared, one-eyed, at Jack. When he didn't respond, Jack asked, "Then would you keep an eye on our stuff?"

The man didn't respond to that either, just closing his eye again and saying, "Bring me back a coffee. Black." He pulled a dollar from his pocket and flipped it blindly but accurately into the air. Jack caught the coin in front of his chest.

Rosemary stood up just as the train gave a sharp jerk and she was tossed against Jack. Involuntarily, he reached out to grab her, placing a hand on the small of her back, all of a sudden liking rail travel more than he ever had before. The feeling didn't last long, as Carolyn spoke up. "Are you going for lunch? Mind if we join you?"

In the second Jack spent trying to think of a polite way to say yes, he did mind, Rosemary said, "Sure. That would be great." To Jack's ear she sounded much more enthusiastic than she had when she accepted his invitation. But maybe he was just being overly sensitive. And he figured it was in his best interests to seem friendly.

"That would be great," he lied. And they all lurched towards the dining car.

"It's not quite the way we ate on the Orient Express," Carolyn said with a smile as they began their meal. But it suited Jack just fine. He was not one for gourmet dining, and anyway he was sitting across from Rosemary and he hardly noticed what he was chewing.

"That," Robert said, "was a unique experience." And for the next several minutes, Robert and Carolyn regaled Jack and Rosemary with tales of traveling on the world's most famous train. They were all caught up in the telling of an incident involving a Hungarian countess, thirteen smuggled diamonds, and three canaries that got loose in the smoking car when they became aware of someone standing by their table.

One of the canaries had just knocked askew the toupee of a distinguished British actor when Robert broke off mid-sentence and said, "Hello, Mike."

The other three turned their heads to see a tall man with long dark hair, a plaid shirt, and an old leather jacket. His eyes were dark and intense. "Hello, Sergeant," Mike said.

Robert laughed. "That's a long time ago. Mike Twobears, this is Jack and Rosemary. You know Carolyn, of course. What are you doing on the tourist train? How come you didn't take the Little Bear?"

Mike shrugged. "Just one of those things." He squeezed closer to

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the table as a waiter went by holding aloft two steaming plates and shooting Mike an annoyed look. "I think I'm going to have to move, but I'd like to catch up with you."

"Yes, it's awfully crowded here," Carolyn said. "Why don't you come visit us in our car? It's Number One. We'll be back there soon."

"See you in a bit, then."

"Who's he?" Jack asked.

Carolyn told them. Mike Twobears was a Cree. He grew up in a cabin twenty miles upriver from Moosonee, helping his father tend the trap lines. When his father grew too old to trap anymore, the family moved to town. And Mike became very actively involved in looking for ways to help his people.

He was instrumental in setting up a healing lodge just outside of town. It was a model facility that offered programs of ancient tribal ritual and herbal medicines, as well as modern therapies, to help people addicted to alcohol and drugs.

"I understand that's a big problem up there," Rosemary said.

Robert nodded. "To put it in perspective, the population of Moosonee is about two thousand. Last year, my friends on the force tell me there were one thousand, four hundred arrests on drunkenness-related charges."

That was why Mike was working with the Ontario Provincial Police to try to counter the problem of smuggling to the dry communities farther up the James Bay coast. They knew that a gang of local smugglers was being run by someone from down south.

Mike thought he knew who it was.

"But," Jack asked, "if the smugglers sell liquor for so much, how can the people afford it?"

"They can't," Robert said. "At the beginning of the month, they'll cash their welfare cheques and spend every penny on liquor. They don't think about food or rent or anything else." Then he smiled. "Anyway, shall we head back to our seats? And does anyone want a coffee?"

They all did.

On the way back to Car One they passed the snack counter. Robert placed the order for four.

"Five," Jack added. "Don't forget our notorious friend."

The steaming Styrofoam mugs were handed over. Robert took them two at a time and passed them to Jack, who set them down on the small table bearing cream and sugar. "Who wants what?" he asked.

"Double cream, double sugar."

"Two creams and one sugar."

"Two sugars, one cream."

"I think he wanted his black."

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"Wait," Jack said. "Was that two creams and no sugar? One cream and one sugar?"

"No," Rosemary said, pushing his hands away from over the top of the cups. "It was two creams and one sugar for me and two creams and two sugars for Carolyn and . . . "

"Here, let me help you." Carolyn reached in and opened a container of cream. "What's in this one?"

"How do you take yours, Jack?" Rosemary said.

"Black. Just like Mr. Notoriety."

"Oh. Well, there's only one black one left. Some cream must've got in an extra one by accident. Sorry."

"It's not your fault," Jack said. "No big deal."

"I'll get you another," Robert offered.

"It's okay. I'll choke it down," Jack said. Lids were placed on all the cups and they weaved their way back through the swaying cars.

When Jack and Rosemary arrived at their seats, Amanda was standing there glaring at the bearded man, arms crossed.

"You said you were going to call me," they heard her say. She was obviously trying to keep her voice subdued, but it was coming out in an angry, penetrating hiss.

The bearded man did not respond.

"You told me it meant something to you." She waited and got nothing. "Well, it may not have meant anything to you, but it sure meant something to me." She clenched her jaw as if trying to keep from saying more. But it didn't work. "I'm surprised you had the nerve to show up on this train."

Finally, he spoke.

"I didn't expect you to be here. I must have got your schedule wrong."

"No, you didn't. Of all the days I had to switch with Jessica. Oh, I wish I'd've told her no." She continued to stare at him, blocking Jack and Rosemary out of their seats. "So that's it? You have nothing more to say?"

"Yeah, I do," he said and tossed a dollar at her that she caught out of self-defense. "Bring me a coffee."

She stared at the dollar in her hand, then gave the bearded man one last withering glare and stormed away. "Excuse me," she said, brushing past Jack and Rosemary.

Rosemary handed the coffee she was carrying to the bearded man, who took it without a word. Jack wondered, with that much coffee, how he slept at night. And when Amanda brought him another cup a few minutes later, Jack felt both amused and impressed in spite of himself.

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Jack was not surprised when the bearded man got up and started walking towards the men's room. He was just about to pull open the door when Mike Twobears came into the car. The two men stopped, frozen in mid-motion, the moment they saw each other. The bearded man moved first, pulling the door open. Before it got wide enough for him to slip through, Mike Twobears reached out a hand and shoved it closed again. "Rafferty," he said.

"Hello, Twobears," Rafferty said, turning back to face him.

Mike Twobears reached out a finger and placed it against the bearded man's chest, pushing him back against the door. Rafferty grabbed Twobears' wrist, yanking the hand away. "Touch me again and I'll snap it off."

"Tough talk. I thought I told you never to come up here again. We don't need your kind in Moosonee."

"Haven't you heard, my friend? It takes all kinds. Now, I have business to take care of so I'd suggest you step back."

Twobears hesitated, then backed up just enough to let Rafferty open the door and squeeze into the small cubicle. "That's better," Rafferty said. "We'll talk about this later, once we get up there." He gave Mike a smile. "Over a beer." And he shut the door.

Mike Twobears gave the closed door an evil look and then walked over to Robert and Carolyn and sat down. They began talking in low voices.

Jack switched his attention back to Rafferty, who seemed to have been in the washroom for a long time. He was about to mention that to Rosemary when the door opened abruptly and Rafferty came out. He did not, however, come back to his seat. He headed back towards the restaurant car, as if going for more coffee. Jack noticed that he seemed to be weaving with the rhythm of the train more heavily than he had before.

"I'm going to stretch my legs," Jack said. "Maybe get a snack." He stood up and braced himself with a hand against the overhead compartment.

"Want company?" Rosemary asked.

"Yes," Jack said, trying not to sound too eager and studiously avoiding looking at Robert and Carolyn, lest they should volunteer to come along too. But the older couple were still sitting with Mike Twobears, watching as a vast area of wilderness—tens of thousands of hectares, Amanda told them—that had been burned out by a forest fire twenty-five years before, and was as yet unrecovered, drifted past the windows.

Jack opened the door for Rosemary and followed her through the passageway leading to the next car. He ran into the back of her when she stopped abruptly. "Hey," he said. "What's up?"

She pointed to her left, but Jack had already noticed. It was Raf-

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ferty. Jack recognized his shirt. The window in the top section of the door to the outside was open and Rafferty was leaning out much too far to look either natural or comfortable. The glass edge at the top of the window was digging into him deeply. His knees were buckled and pressed forward against the steel bottom panel at the base of the door, and his head was not visible, trailing below the level of the window.

"Hey," Jack said, "are you okay?" Although it was immediately obvious that he was not. Rafferty didn't respond. Jack reached out and tapped the back of Rafferty's shirt. No response. "Are you okay?" he asked again, although anyone could tell that something was seriously wrong. And when Jack leaned in closer he could hear something solid smacking rhythmically against the side of the train. Rafferty's head, Jack realized later.

"Jack, do something," Rosemary said finally. "I think he's sick."

Jack took hold of Rafferty's shirt with both hands and tugged up and backwards.

He nearly fell over when Rafferty flopped back into the train and dropped heavily onto the shifting plates between the cars. His hair was matted to his head and his shirt was soaked. His face was a mass of ugly bruises and welts.

"He's not sick," Jack said. "He's dead."

Rosemary gasped and looked away.

Jack knelt and began searching the dead man's pockets.

"What are you looking for?"

"Anything. Like who this guy is. Or was." He pulled out a ring of keys and some coins from one pocket, then a well-used wallet from another. He opened the wallet.

"Was he a smuggler?" Rosemary asked, as if there might be an association membership card inside.

Jack didn't answer. "His name wasn't Rafferty," he said, holding out a couple of credit cards. "It was Sewell." Then Jack pulled something else from another pocket. "And he wasn't a smuggler," he added.

"How do you know?"

Jack held out the small leather folder he had found. Rosemary took it and flipped it open. "He was a cop," Jack said.

The badge flapped gently in the air, dangling from Rosemary's hand. She stared at it as Jack scrutinized the body further.

"Oh my God! Was it an accident, do you think?"

"I'd be very surprised."

"You mean somebody murdered him?"

Jack nodded.

"But how?"

"There aren't any bullet holes I can see. There's no stab wounds either and no blood." He picked up the coffee cup and sniffed it.

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"Smell anything?" Rosemary asked.

"I think it's Colombian, medium roast."

"That's not what I meant. How can you joke at a time like this?"

"Sorry," he said, "but I don't know much about poison. I guess that's what did it."

"He didn't seem much like a cop," Rosemary said.

"My guess is he was undercover, trying to break the smuggling operation."

"What do we do?"

"Go tell Robert. He used to be a cop, too."

Just at that moment, there was a mighty lurch that tossed Jack and Rosemary together and then threw them to the side, and the train began to move more and more slowly until finally it came to a dead stop.

Jack looked out at the endless miles of suddenly motionless trees and asked aloud, "What the hell's going on now?"

"We're not sure what's wrong," Amanda said. "There's a problem with the engine. It's not something that we can fix here, so we're stuck for a little while." A loud groan went up from the crowd in Car One. Jack, standing just inside the door, having left Rosemary with the body, could imagine the same reaction in every other car as well, where the same message was being repeated. When the noise subsided, Amanda continued, "We have to wait here for another engine to come down from Moosonee. That should take about two hours." She put on her brightest cruise-director smile. "Then we'll be on our way again." The smile vanished just as abruptly. "We're sorry for the delay and we will be offering food and beverage vouchers to compensate you for any inconvenience."

She turned toward Jack and he motioned for her to come, then waved to Robert, Carolyn, and Mike. The urgency of his expression brought them to their feet quickly. Moments later, they were all crowded in the space between the cars, hovering over the corpse.

"How do you think it was done?" Carolyn asked.

"I think someone poisoned his coffee," Jack said. "The question is, who? Every one of us handled a cup for him, except Mike. Any one of us could have slipped something into it. And, since we have no idea what kind of poison it was or how fast it worked, we're no closer to knowing if it was the first person or the last one."

"Well," Robert said, "we can't worry about that right now. We have to do something to avoid a panic."

Jack thought for a minute, then said, "I have an idea. Amanda, can you turn the lights off in our car?"

Outside, it started to rain harder.

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"Okay, Amanda, you have to make this look official. Mike, can you handle him with me?"

"Why me?"

"Because right now I don't think we want more people than absolutely necessary to know that he's dead. Probably murdered. Everyone in this train is wrangy enough, sitting here in the middle of nowhere."

"All right," Mike said. "But only to avoid panic."

"Fine. Carolyn and Rosemary, you field any questions. Robert, you go ahead and look officious. Act like a doctor." Robert didn't look happy about the situation, but Jack had other concerns. He looked over at Mike. "You ready?"

Mike nodded and they both bent down and hefted Sewell to his feet. Jack had never lifted a dead man before and he underestimated the weight, his knees buckling momentarily. Once he got Sewell settled with one of the dead man's arms around his shoulder and the other around Mike's, Jack turned to Amanda. "How does he look?"

"Dead," she said. When he looked over and saw Sewell's head lolling back to a gag-inducing extreme, Jack had to agree.

"Tip his head forward, that'll look better."

"You want me to touch it?" Amanda asked.

"I'll do it," Rosemary said, placing a hand on the back of Sewell's head and pushing it forward so that his beard rested on his chest.

"That's better. Okay, Amanda, hit the lights."

"I don't like this," Robert said, stopping Amanda in her tracks. "The Moosonee police will be really unhappy about what we're doing here."

Jack wasn't sure what to say, but then Mike stepped in. "I know it violates every procedure, Rob, but think about the situation we could have here if we don't keep this under wraps."

Robert's face grew more and more grim, but he relented. "I oughta have my head examined, but all right."

"Okay, Amanda—now," Jack said.

There were squeals and shouts as the train car went dark. With the low skies and the rain, it was dim enough to disguise Sewell's true condition, but not so dark that moving him would be hazardous and Jack and Mike might trip, causing some unsuspecting passenger to wind up with a dead man in their lap.

As soon as she had thrown the switch, Amanda moved into the car. "Please stay in your seats," she said. "We've got a little problem with the power, but it'll be fixed very soon. Please remain seated. We also have a sick man here. We're just going to take him back to the club car so he can stretch out." She turned and indicated Robert. "This man is a doctor, and he's agreed to see to the patient's condition."

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She moved briskly, followed by Robert and then Mike and Jack sidling along with Sewell dangling between them. Much to Jack's surprise, they reached the club car without incident.

When the body was stretched out across three chairs, Amanda found a tablecloth behind the bar and spread it over the upper part of Sewell's body. Then the six of them stood looking at each other.

"So," Jack said, "who was it?" He pointed to Amanda. "The jilted lover?" Then to Mike. "The overprotective healer?" He pointed to Carolyn. "The outraged citizen?" He started to point to Robert.

"Stop it." Even in retirement, the ex-cop had retained his authoritative policeman's bark. And he showed it for the first time. "It could have been any of us," Robert said. "You've already pointed out that all six of us had the opportunity. And it looks like at least four of us had a motive. But we're not going to sit around here while some amateur detective rattles off the minute details and then points an accusing finger at the killer. No, sir.

"We've broken enough rules as it is. I only agreed to all this to keep the situation from getting worse. From creating a panic situation all along the train. We're going to leave this alone now and turn it over to the police. We'll let them handle it properly. We're already in enough trouble for tampering with evidence and disturbing a crime scene. We're not going to do anything to make the situation worse. Now, I'm going to stay right here and keep an eye on this guy," he jerked a thumb at Sewell's body, "until we get to Moosonee. You can all go back to your seats." He started for the door.

"Do you want someone to bring you a coffee?" Jack asked.

Robert didn't smile. "Go back to your seats." He walked to the door of the car and Mike, Amanda, and Carolyn went past him and out without a word. Neither Rosemary nor Jack moved right away. Then, with a last look at the body, they both headed towards the exit and Robert shut the door.

For a long time, Jack sat looking through the window at the rain and the stunted northern forest.

"Thinking about whodunit?" Rosemary asked after a time, although her tone was not as lighthearted as her words.

"Among other things. Why?"

"You just look sort of glum, that's all. And I think I know the reason."

"Oh yeah?"

"Uh-huh."

"So tell me."

She glanced around quickly. "I can't here," she said and stood. "Come with me." She walked back towards the space between the

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cars where the body had first been found. When Jack caught up to her, she was leaning against the door opposite to the one out of which Sewell had been draped.

"So what's bugging me?" Jack asked.

"You wanted another chance to rifle Sewell's pockets and you didn't get it."

Jack looked shocked. "What are you talking about?"

"You started to do it before," she said. "Before you found that badge. You took too long going through too many pockets. That's what gave you away, you know."

"Gave me away? Gave what away?"

"That you killed him."

"What?" His raised his eyebrows. "Just because the idea of searching a dead man's pockets made me work slowly?"

"No. I think you did it because you didn't even open that badge and look at it before you showed it to me. You knew what it was. You knew he was a cop all along. And I think he knew you were a smuggler. And you wanted to go through his pockets thoroughly in case he had anything against you on him right now."

"You can't prove a thing."

"No. But the cops might, with my help."

Jack conceded that she had a point. "So what's your silence worth?" he asked, debating how to kill her and when.

"How much did Sewell say you could get for a forty-ouncer?"

Jack hesitated, then said, "Nine hundred bucks."

"And what can you buy them for?"

"Thirty-five bucks."

Rosemary whistled. "That's a hefty markup."

"Yeah."

"Enough for two people to split."

"If they had to," Jack said.

"Oh," Rosemary said, "they definitely have to." Then she turned her back and started towards their seats.

Jack watched her walk away. Then he felt a jolt as the new engine joined the train. A few minutes later they were moving again. ●

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The Cemetery Prints

by Peter Turnbull

MONDAY 20:00 HRS—20:45 HRS

Malcolm Montgomerie hadn't been to the pub before that particular evening. In the event, he was only to return to it once more before it was shut down as being an unprofitable concern. He went there on the first occasion with Jock Dyatt, because Jock Dyatt liked his beer, and because Jock Dyatt had only just discovered the Beer Factory after it had been open for six months and was determined to make up for lost time. Jock Dyatt drank beer like some folk drink wine: not in great quantities, not for the effect of alcohol, but because of the flavour, because of the interest of the taste of one beer as compared to another. Jock Dyatt would go a long way to drink a specific beer, one he hadn't sampled before, for instance, or one he had enjoyed before and thought worth the day-long detour he would have to make to enjoy it again. He had had few girlfriends because whenever he had leave from the newspaper he would go to one of the many areas of England renowned for its beer. So that one year, for example, he would holiday in the Duchy of Cornwall so that he could sample the products of the small family-owned breweries in Devon and Cornwall and Somerset. Another year he would visit East Anglia for the beer to be had from the brewers of the "Flatlands." If a girlfriend went with him, she would invariably be taken from pub to pub, to pub, to pub and be entertained with conversation about original gravity, copper vats or wooden vats, and various methods of treating hops. But he never got drunk, and his stomach wouldn't expand.

When the Beer Factory was opened in Glasgow in converted

Peter Turnbull's police procedurals have an air of low-key realism that comes, as much as anything, from their reliance on happenstance: an off-duty cop is in a pub when an ageing drunk makes a compromising admission. Other events lead serendipitously to information that takes the inquiry further. It isn't so much the genius of the cops but the way life unfolds that leads to justice in a Turnbull-style police story. ¶

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premises off Sauchiehall Street, Jock Dyatt was beside himself with glee, like, it was observed, "a wean with a new toy." For here was his dream, a pub run by aficionados of beer for aficionados of beer, not owned by a big brewery which sold only its own beer, but an independent shop, dependent solely on "guest beers," which changed each week—by far the majority of them coming from England. It was Jock Dyatt's firmly held belief that just as the Scots make the world's finest whisky, only the English can make beer. So Jock Dyatt, with his clean spectacles and his trim beard, who looked every inch the small-circulation newspaper journalist that he was, could now sample his beloved English beer without leaving his beloved city of Glasgow, still less his beloved Scotland. When he first heard about the pub, by then six months in existence, he had phoned Malcolm Montgomerie and suggested that they visit it, especially since they had not seen each other for a "wee while."

So they had visited it together. Two good mates going for a beer or two. They had visited the Beer Factory one evening in May, warm and very light at night. Inside, the pub had been decorated in a style which evoked an English pub of old: wooden seats around the wall, wooden tables with circular-topped wooden stools (loose, not chained to the floor as in many Glasgow bars), naked brick walls painted with varnish, a few books on bookshelves, and several posters from earlier times which had been framed, such as the notice of the sale by auction of a farm near Keighley in the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1899 (returning an annual rent of £2 10s 6d). The names of the guest beers were chalked up on a blackboard which stood on an A-frame in one corner of the floor area. That week the guest beers were Old Speckled Hen, Black Sheep, Timothy Taylor's, and Marston's Pedigree.

Montgomerie and Dyatt sat at a vacant table by the empty fire grate, as far as possible from a man who was too old to be dressed head to toe in denim but who chose to cling onto a long-past youth, and who had had too much Old Speckled Hen. He was arguing with another man, the argument being at the point where it was about to spill over into actual violence. Montgomerie bought a round, then Jock Dyatt. The arguing men left the pub, bringing forth a comment from the barmaid about not knowing how men can drink so much and still remain upright. Then the pub fell quiet save for one or two private and hushed conversations.

Then "Old Mick" joined them. He ambled over to their table, hovering over it, and said, "Good evening," to which Montgomerie and Dyatt responded promptly and in unison, "Good evening." Old Mick then said, "I saw you two gentlemen and I wanted to say hello; there's nothing wrong with that, is there?" To which Dyatt said, "Nothing at all."

Old Mick then ambled away, and Montgomerie and Dyatt car-

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ried on talking and their conversation moved on to close scrapes they had had in pubs. Dyatt had just finished recounting the incident whereby he had once tricked his way out of certain death in a bar in Australia by pretending he'd lost his voice and thereby concealed his English-sounding accent, when Old Mick rejoined them. This time he sat on the stool next to Montgomerie.

"I've been drinking," he said.

"You don't say," Jock Dyatt replied testily.

"Since three o'clock. It's now . . . what time is it now, wee pal?"

"Eight-thirty." Montgomerie glanced at the clock on the wall.

"I've done some bad things in my time."

Beside him Montgomerie felt Dyatt stiffen with annoyance. But Montgomerie, the cop, said, "Oh?"

"Aye, son. They call me 'Old Mick' now. Once I was 'Mad Mick.'" He was a man in his middle years, thickset, white hair, white beard, very clean, a man whose drink problem didn't prevent him from attending to the matter of personal hygiene. He wore a red padded jacket and a black T-shirt which revealed a stomach expanded by the intake of large amounts of empty carbohydrates. Montgomerie also noticed scarring on the back of his hands where tattoos had been surgically removed. "Done bad things."

"Well, we all have things that we have to live with," Montgomerie smiled.

"Shop-breaking."

"Shop-breaking?"

"There's worse things to have done. Fights. Bottled a guy once."

"Oh, yes?"

"My name's Mick. 'Old Mick,' now. 'Mad Mick' once. Mad as Mad Mick, don't come much madder."

"I'm Malcolm. This is Jock."

"Never been caught, though." Old Mick spoke as if over-concentrating.

"Lucky man."

"Clever. Got to keep one step ahead of the law. That's the ticket. I live alone now. I got divorced twenty years ago."

"Sorry about that."

"The drink, see, son."

"Women don't go for it too much." Jock Dyatt spoke testily. He seemed to Montgomerie to resent Old Mick's pushiness. Montgomerie was sympathetic to Jock Dyatt's feelings, but his cop's intuition told him that Old Mick was a ball to pick up and run with. He and Jock Dyatt could go for a beer some other time. Two middle-aged women came into the bar, bought a glass of stout each, and sat beside the A-frame and the blackboard.

"How did you keep one step ahead of the police?" Montgomerie asked.

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"Different ways, different times. I played a game with them. I always let them have my prints."

"Dangerous."

"I used to live for danger. Not now. Now I've calmed. I always used to leave my dabs, that way the police only had to pull me once. Just once. Then they'd have me for a lot of bad things. Loved the risk. Haven't done anything for a wee while."

"Pleased to hear it," Montgomerie smiled.

"It's the best way." Dyatt entered the conversation reluctantly.

"Did some graves once."

"Graves?"

"Twenty, thirty years ago. Sighthill Cemetery. It was an initiation."

"Initiation?"

"Into the Angels."

"You were an Angel?"

"My tattoos." He held up the back of his hands. "Had them taken off. I ran with Satan's Slaves. No bike less than 500cc. Mine was a 750cc. A Honda."

"A Honda?" said Jock Dyatt.

But Montgomerie again said, "Graves?"

"Initiation. To get into the Angels. Me and this guy Blitz Buchanan the 'Bampot.' Blitz came off his bike a year or two later."

"Dead?"

"As could be. He was travelling at the time."

"I see."

"It's the only other way out of the Angels. You can't leave. It's hard to get in. Impossible to get out."

"How did you get out?"

"Grew old. You get so you don't feel you belong. You go to the chapter meets but you're edged out. So you don't go again. They accept that, don't hassle you, so long as you kid on you want to stay in. Me, I was glad to leave. I'd had enough. Didn't let on, though."

"So you got in by ripping up flowerbeds in Sighthill Cemetery?"

Old Mick grinned. "More than that, son."

"Oh yes?"

Jock Dyatt relaxed. He realised Montgomerie's track and now listened intently.

"Dug 'em up, son."

"'Em?"

"Two of 'em."

"You dug up two coffins?"

"That's what we had to do. Me and Blitz. We had the hours of darkness to dig up two coffins, open them, and put the corpse on the ground."

"That was in Sighthill Cemetery?"

"Aye . . . we were in Satan's Slaves. Blitz came off his bike a few

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years later. I stayed in until I was in my forties, got to the point where I couldn't keep up. Used to slow down on the bends . . . got tanked in fights . . . came to a point where I wasn't 'Mad Mick' and was 'Old Mick' instead. See, me, son, I've been drinking since three P.M. Me and Blitz were like brothers. Same age. Twins, not brothers." Old Mick drank deeply of his beer. "That's not all."

"No?"

"It's all I'm telling."

"Not so drunk then, eh, Mick?"

"Not so drunk."

"Drink here often, Mick?"

"Every day. I always finish here. I start in the Salt Market and visit pubs till I get here. I live close by. I finish here, get in about seven. Stay till nine. Near daily. Never on Sundays. I have Sunday off. I was brought up a Catholic."

"Every day except Sunday." Montgomerie stood. Dyatt followed his cue. "May see you again then, Mick."

They shook hands. Montgomerie and Dyatt went to another bar where they spent the remainder of the evening in enjoyable conversation.

TUESDAY 09:15 HRS—21:00HRS

Montgomerie had begun the day shift at 06:00 prompt. There was an arrest at 07:00: never pleasant, but as it was always explained to the young constables, the practice is not that of a repressive police state. It is that 07:00 is the best time to ensure that someone is at home, as near daylight as possible. 03:00 would be even more certain, but *that* would be repressive. 10:00 and you'll likely miss them. And this particular arrestee had committed a serious crime against the person. Evidence irrefutable. If he didn't like being knocked up out of his pit at 07:00, then he shouldn't have . . . well, he shouldn't. . . . When said felon had been hackled in a quiet and smooth operation but was nevertheless full of his rights in the cells, there was then the paperwork to attend to. Important, nay vital, but oh-so-tedious. Then at 09:15 Montgomerie decided that the staff at Sighthill Cemetery would be at their place of work. He phoned and asked to speak to the cemetery super.

"Can't give a date." Montgomerie leaned back in his chair and held the phone against his left ear with his right hand, the forearm of his right arm being circled around the back of his head. "This guy could have been in his sixties but was probably younger, age has wearied him, reckon he was in his twenties when he did it, if he did it at all. Quite a time window, probably before your time."

"Probably before I was born."

"Me too, but you do have records?"

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"Yes, but by name and plot number. If you don't know which graves were disturbed, it would be hard to trace any record."

"Aye, that's what we don't know. Would any long-serving staff member . . . "

"They don't exist."

"No?"

"We have a very high staff turnover. Three years and you're a veteran. Our longest-serving staff member is a full five years in the job. So, no brains I can pick. I also haven't heard mention of it. I would have thought that police records would have helped you. Such a crime would certainly have been reported."

"I'll try them. Thanks for your help." He replaced the phone and reached for the keyboard of his computer terminal, tapped in his password, and entered "Sighthill Cemetery." A few reported crimes flashed up on the screen: a large selection of iron railings had been removed, some years earlier a section of valuable flagstones had been removed. No crime had been brought forward from pre-computerisation days. He'd drawn a blank. But, in fairness, he'd only been in pursuit of a curiosity on his part, chasing up a chance remark by a stranger he'd met in a bar. It wasn't a reported crime, not at the present, at least. It might be only a harmless, if tasteless, fantasy of a drunk. There were, on the other hand, a whole In tray of actual reported crimes on his desk awaiting his attention. Then his phone rang. It was Jock Dyatt.

"I looked up our archives," Dyatt said after the preliminaries. "We did a piece on desecrated graves, two in number, at Sighthill Cemetery twenty-five years ago. If he was part of that it means 'Old Mick' is about forty-nine."

"Blimey. The ravages of drink."

"Lesson for us both, there."

"Lesson for you, squire."

"Hey, listen, I'm a real-ale freak. Alcoholics spill more than we drink." Dyatt grinned down the phone.

"Tell that to the Addiction Unit."

"Do you want this info or not?"

"Yes, yes, yes, one thousand times, yes."

"Right. Check this. *Star,* date twenty-five years past, April of the year, Sighthill Cemetery, two graves disturbed, and I mean dug up, disinterred. . . . The press was notified but asked not to report anything unless a prosecution occurred, so as not to distress the lieges, you see . . . "

"The old press/police relationship."

"Well, you never know when you'll be needing us, so it does not do to keep things from us. In the event, there was no prosecution and so the story was consigned to the archives. Our information is that the interested police officer was one D. C. Sussock."

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"Ray!"
"You know him?"
"Aye. He's a sergeant now. D. S. Sussock."
"He's your best bet then."
"Muchos, my son, muchos."
"You owe me a beer. And one not disturbed by graverobbers."

"Cast your mind back, Sarge." Montgomerie sat, as invited, in front of Sussock's desk.

"To when?" Sussock put his pen down. To the eye of the youthful Montgomerie, he was aged, haggard, a lean, lantern-jawed man whose face was lined with worry and age.

"To when you were a Detective Constable twenty-five years ago."

"Longer than I care to remember. But I'll try. . . ."

"Sighthill Cemetery."

"Yes?"

"Two graves disinterred. Ring any bells? April time of year?"

Sussock sat forward. "I remember. . . . God in heaven . . . yes, it's coming back . . . bits of it . . . two ancient graves . . . both well over a hundred years old . . . we were relieved because we didn't have to inform any relatives but I remember the medical officer going grey overnight from fear that the ghouls that did it had released cholera spores . . . but . . ."

"Clearly they hadn't."

"Aye, we'd have known about it if they had. The graves were side by side . . . they'd lifted the corpses out of the coffins and laid them on the soil. Never got anywhere, mounted a watch in case they came back . . . why the interest?"

"Met a fella in a pub last night. Claims he and his mate did it. Initiation rite into the Hells Angels."

"Did he? Could be interesting since it was never made public—he'd have to have been close to whoever did it, if he didn't actually do it himself. I doubt the Fiscal will want to proceed with it now, given the time lapse, won't serve a purpose, but I think we could be doing with a wee chat with him. He must be getting on now?"

"Probably only forty-nine or fifty."

"A mere sapling."

"Looks older. Drink's taken him in a bad way. Very clean, not a down-and-out, but his mind's away with the drink."

"Probably not that much away."

"I doubt if he'll remember speaking to me and my pal. That sort of 'away.'"

"I see." Sussock laid his hand on his forehead, then drew it down over his face. "Let me think, think, think. . . . There were two perpetrators, evidence of two men. We picked up two sets of prints . . . they'd left something behind . . . a thermos flask. Had their latents

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all over it . . . my heavens, that's it, they were the prints that became known as the 'Cemetery Prints.' . . . What was it now . . . over the years they kept reoccurring, two perps . . . always together, not bothering about their prints being found . . . After a while, we realised that we had been intended to find the thermos flask, it hadn't been left behind out of carelessness. . . . It had been a sort of gift, a sort of 'catch us if you can' number. Those two prints got lifted time and time again, burglaries, shop-breaking."

"Shop-breaking?"

"Is that significant?"

"This guy mentioned that he'd done that."

"Did he? He gets more and more interesting." Ray Sussock glanced out of his office window over to where the M8 cut a deep trench through the business heartland of Glasgow, then he looked up the length of Sauchiehall Street, at the angular buildings of glass and concrete, and at the graceful curve of Charing Cross Mansions, whose red brick often glows in the sun if caught at the correct angle: a low, bright sun on a winter afternoon does the trick handsomely. "We got one, we never did get the other. I'm sure it was that case, crime after crime of an ever more serious nature, all down to the two guys who owned the Cemetery Prints. Left shop-breaking behind and got into assaults, then. . . . I am certain this is what happened. Over the years cases and inquiries blend and merge in your mind, but if I'm right, they attacked a woman . . . she screamed, brought on two cops on foot patrol . . . they cleared the pitch on motorbikes."

"That ties in with the Hells Angels angle."

"Doesn't it just. Left the woman shaken but otherwise in one piece. Had their prints all over her coat, a leather coat and handbag, so we found later. Anyway, we had a traffic patrol in the area and he gave chase. . . . They stuck together, got onto the M8. One took a turnoff, the other stayed on the motorway, moving towards Edinburgh at a rate of knots. Powerful bike, traffic cop couldn't hope to stay with him so he followed the guy who had turned off. Chase continued, guy took a bend at high speed, lost it . . . lost his life. The other escaped. We took the prints from the deceased biker, turned out to be one half of the Cemetery Prints."

"The elusive Cemetery Prints."

"The deceased guy had a punchy name, a German name, reminded me of the war . . ."

"Blitz?" Montgomerie offered. "Blitz Buchanan the Bampot."

Sussock's jaw opened. "I think you ought to go and find that guy."

"That was the name?"

"That was the name. His mate getting creamed like that didn't stop the other one crookin'. He carried on, getting worse. He did a murder eventually."

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"A murder?"

"A code four-one. That is one unsolved crime that's always left on file. I can't remember. Leave it with me, will you? I'll get back to you. I don't know when, a day or two, a week or two, we're talking about a murder of twenty years ago. A week or two, even a month or two, won't make any odds now . . . but it's one of those things. If I force it, it won't come back to me. If I leave it now you've triggered the memories, it'll come back."

"Thanks, Sarge."

"No, thank *you*. It was a bad murder. I was about your age, no older, but it angered me. I'll get back to you. I want this one wrapped up, I want that very badly."

Montgomerie left P Division police station at 14:00 hours. He signed out at the uniform bar and spent a few minutes chatting to Elka Willems who was coming on duty, whose high cheekbones and blond hair betrayed her Nordic ancestry and whose beauty was not at all diminished by the unflattering serge uniform. Montgomerie walked home to his flat off Highburgh Road, felt agitated and so walked across the road for a beer at the Rock Island, and then returned to his flat, had a quiet evening in and an early night. He felt that things had moved that day.

WEDNESDAY/THURSDAY—MIDNIGHT APPROXIMATELY

Ray Sussock and Elka Willems lay side by side in the double bed in Elka Willems's neatly kept room and kitchen in Langside. The glow of the street lamps of Baker Street softly illuminated the room, decorated in a pastel shade of blue with a Van Gogh print on the wall. Sussock said, "Smith." He said it suddenly.

"What . . . ?" Elka Willems muttered sleepily, turning and flinging a limp arm over Sussock's chest.

"Smith," Sussock repeated, looking at the ceiling and sounding pleased with himself. "It's a name I was trying to remember."

"Who on earth could expect you to remember an obscure and unusual name like 'Smith'?" Elka Willems was angered at being woken. "I mean, I bet there's no more than two people of that name in the entire Commonwealth, probably none at all in New Zealand. I mean, what was the name of the Rhodesian Prime Minister . . . well, that's one, so there's only one more. . . ."

"Knock it off, Elka. It's something I said I'd do for Malcolm Montgomerie. Anyway, sarcasm doesn't become you."

THURSDAY 09:00—20:30 HRS

Can't put a price on human life. No, not can't, mustn't. Must not. I must not . . . times five hundred by tomorrow morning. I must not

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put a price on human life. All life is sacrosanct. The murder of a drunken down-and-out is just as evil a deed as the murder of an elder statesman. But even allowing for that, Montgomerie saw what Sussock had meant about being annoyed by the murder of Sandra Smith. He read over the dusty file which had been obtained for him from the void by the collator. Ray Sussock hadn't been able to give much information—a young woman called Smith, murdered about twenty-five years ago—but it had been enough and the collator had come up with the goods. Sandra Smith was twenty-two years old when she was murdered. A medical student, of humble but respectable origins. One evening she went for a walk in the woods near her home, her body was found a few hours later. Twenty-two stab wounds. One for each year of her life. Jewellery missing. The murder weapon, an ordinary kitchen knife, was found close by. The handle bore the second set of latents known as the Cemetery Prints. The owner of one set of the prints had creamed himself at one hundred miles an hour, the owner of the second set had continued to commit crimes as a lone operator, culminating in murder. Hair torn from the scalp of the attacker and found in Sandra Smith's hands had been retained. So even if Old Mick, who drinks each day from 3 o'clock until 9:00 P.M., except Sundays, and finishes each drinking session at the Beer Factory, had had his fingerprints surgically removed along with his Satan's Slaves tattoos, his DNA tests should prove interesting. He thought of Old Mick lamenting the days when he was Mad Mick, lamenting the things he had done. As well he might. Montgomerie then pondered Sandra Smith who, had she lived, would be in her late forties, enjoying her adult children, at her professional peak, contributing significantly to her society.

But instead . . . instead, she had gone for a walk.

Instead she had crossed the path of Mad Mick, Murderous Mad Mick.

Instead . . . instead . . . instead.

That evening Malcolm Montgomerie went to the Beer Factory. He took two constables with him. As they walked towards the pub, Montgomerie took time to ponder the unimaginative name given to the premises, especially since it purported to evoke a traditional English public house. There were many intriguing names which could have been hijacked by the proprietors, "The Swan with Two Necks," a not uncommon pub name but one which had always caught Montgomerie's fancy whenever he had been among the English, being but one example.

As the three officers entered the pub, all conversation ceased. Not, it felt, so much out of hostility—it wasn't that sort of pub—but rather, out of curiosity. Montgomerie saw Old Mick sitting by the empty fire grate. He walked up to him. "Hello, Old Mick."

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"I don't know you." Old Mick looked at Montgomerie with a puzzled expression. "Never seen you before." Then he saw the two uniformed officers and his expression became apprehensive, then hostile.

"We met a few days ago."

"I've never spoken to you, son."

"That says all there is to say about your condition, Mick. Come on, on your feet, you're under arrest."

MONDAY 09:00 HRS

Montgomerie called on Mr. and Mrs. Smith at their pensioners' flat in Castlemilk. It was a cramped ground-floor flat: one sitting room, one bedroom, one kitchen. It was cluttered with brightly kept memorabilia, photographs particularly, one of a smiling blond-haired girl in a university gown. The flat had the stuffy quality which Montgomerie had always associated with aged persons' homes, the product of frailty, decay, and heating always turned up. Mr. Smith seemed weak. Mrs. Smith, much smaller, seemed stronger.

"He's still too drunk to interview, even now, four days after we arrested him." Montgomerie spoke softly. "It may be that the drink has destroyed his brain. If that's the case, he won't be going to trial; the sheriff will issue a Secure Accommodation Order so he'll be spending the rest of his days in the State Hospital."

"So he'll never walk free?"

"Highly unlikely." Montgomerie looked out onto a gardener tending rosebushes, beyond which were more pensioners' flats.

"Man by the name of Mitchell?" said the woman.

Montgomerie nodded. "Mitchell."

"So now we know, after all these years."

Mr. Smith stood shakily, unsteadily, supporting himself on two aluminium walking sticks. He spoke for the first time. "She would have made something of herself, Sandra would." He walked unsteadily across the floor and into the bedroom. He closed the door behind him.

Mrs. Smith glanced at the photograph of the young woman in a university gown and then turned to Montgomerie. "I'm sorry about my husband, sir. He doesn't say much but that doesn't mean he doesn't feel things." She touched her chest. "In here, I mean."

It took a further six months before Montgomerie and Dyatt could organise their personal agendas so that they could once again go out for a beer together. At Dyatt's insistence they once again went to the Beer Factory. "Let's hope we don't get disturbed this time."

As they turned the corner from Sauchiehall Street, by then aglow with Christmas lights, they stopped in their tracks. The building which had been the Beer Factory was boarded up, a massive For Sale sign nailed to the wall. ●

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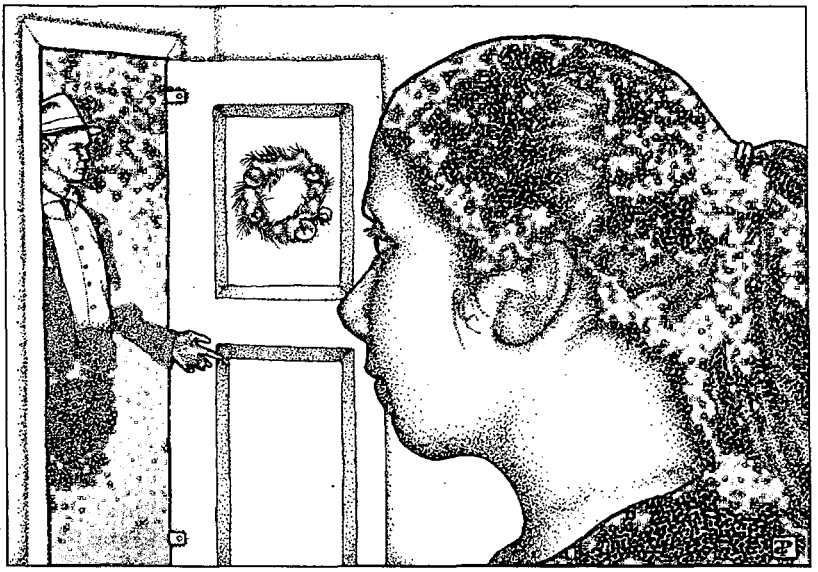

Art by Andrew Perkowski

The Honored Guest

by Marianne Strong

I was six years old when I first saw the honored guest. He slipped quietly and with bowed head into the empty chair at the family dinner table. I didn't know, then, that he would haunt me into my adult life.

I went to our local Catholic school, rode my red bike to the local playground on Saturdays, played hopscotch with my friends, excelled in history in high school, went to the senior prom with the boy of my dreams, went to college in Washington D.C., finished Georgetown Law School, and landed a position with a high-powered firm.

In the course of all those years, I saw him only a very few times, always a soft-spoken guest who came, sat in his chair at the dinner table, and then went away as quietly as he had entered, leaving me with an ache of love and sadness as palpable as an open wound.

By the time I was fifteen, he'd come for our holiday meal four times, exactly once every three years. I knew that he was Mr. Porchek, my parents having told me to address him as such. I

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knew he was my father's brother, but I knew little else. After that Christmas Eve when I was fifteen, I didn't see him again until the day of my Aunt Catherine's wake, thirteen years later.

By that time, I thought that I had forgotten all about Mr. Porchek, but he was always there, a shadow somewhere in my soul, or in my imagination. He wasn't a visible ghost, trailing chains like old Marley in Dickens. He was a feeling rather than a presence, like an uprising of mist from some subterranean stream that ebbed and flowed inside me, a mist that rose unbidden and then was forced back into the depths by law books, exams, briefs, boyfriends, new suits, new furniture, all the flotsam and jetsom of life that clogs the waters underneath.

"'The Honored Guest' incorporates the Polish Christmas customs I experienced as a child," Marianne Strong told *EQMM*. "My maiden name was Wilpiszewski." Ms. Strong often returns to her roots in the Pennsylvania mining communities in her fiction, and many of the workers in the mines were, of course, Polish immigrants. This new story embodies the spirit of Christmas even as it unravels a mystery involving violence and tragedy. ✝

No, he wasn't like Marley, but he was a Christmas ghost all right, a ghost of Christmases past.

Christmas Eve twenty-two years ago began, as Christmas Eves always did, with my waking to wonderful smells. Mother had made the cookies and cakes days ago, but on the day before Christmas, by ten in the morning, she had begun the preparations for our traditional Polish Christmas Eve dinner, the *Wigilia,* more important to Poles than Christmas itself.

Unlike Dad, Mom had been born in the United States rather than in Poland, so our *Wigilia* wasn't strictly traditional. We'd have the usual fish, potatoes, and cabbage, but Mom also made a piquant cranberry sauce, and an apple-and-sweet-potato casserole whose sweet-smelling brown sugar and orange juice bubbled in its baking dish.

I spent that morning helping Mom with the mundane tasks of wiping washed pots and pans, bringing up jars of red beets from the cellar, and squealing on Ray, my eight-year-old brother, whenever he tried sneaking out of the kitchen to head for the back door. I generally don't like squealing, but if I had to work, so did he.

By three o'clock, I had pestered Mom enough to frazzle her into allowing me to get out the *oplatek* to lay on the table, and that's when I found out about our honored guest. You see, just before dinner starts, Poles share *oplatek,* rectangular wafers of unleav-

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ened bread, with each other. You offer the wafer to someone who breaks off a small piece and eats it. At the same time, you make a wish for the person: good health, happiness for their upcoming wedding, etc. Of course, Ray and I always wished each other things like, "Hope you get bit by an anaconda," "Hope all your ugly hair falls out," "Hope your nose gets even bigger," all under our breath to avoid censorship from Mom or Dad.

I liked to set the wafers at each person's place, because that way I got to choose what color and picture I wanted. The wafers were generally white, pink, or blue, with pictures of the nativity, a choir of angels, etc. I always chose the three kings.

I usually set the least desirable wafer at the place set for the guest. We always kept the tradition of inviting an honored guest, because if you had an odd number at dinner, it was bad luck. Mom, Dad, Ray, me, and the baby, Annie, made five. Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe and their two children made nine altogether, so Mom always invited another guest, often somebody from the church who lived alone.

That Christmas Eve, I put the white wafer with its rather sketchy picture of the town of Bethlehem on the guest's plate. "Who's the guest this year, Mom?" I asked.

Mom, opening the jar of red beets, didn't answer.

I assumed that she was concentrating so hard on getting off the top of the jar that she hadn't heard me. So I repeated the question.

Still no answer.

"Mom," I yelled in my most annoyingly squeaky pitch, "who's the guest?"

"A new guest."

"From the church?"

"No."

This terseness was a mistake on Mom's part, because it only set off my determination to have my question answered. "From where, then?"

"From nowhere."

I thought about that. "Everybody's from somewhere," I announced.

"Yeah," Ray piped in, "even you. From the moon."

I stuck out my tongue at him, then turned back to Mom.

"Mom!" I screeched.

Mother turned on me. "You don't need to know. Go upstairs and get the good napkins."

I was hurt, incensed, and amazed at such insensitivity on Christmas Eve, especially from Mom. It didn't help that Ray was chuckling evilly behind me.

"I have to know what to call him," I sulked.

To my surprise, Mom turned to me again and nodded. "Yes," she said, "you do. He is Mr. Porchek."

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I was confused. That was our name. "You mean Grandpa?" I said.

Ray guffawed. "Grandpa's dead."

"Ray," Mother said, in her Mother, not Mom, voice.

Ray stopped.

"Not Grandpa," Mom said to me. "Just Mr. Porchek, Helen. You must be polite to him and don't ask questions. He is the honored guest and he comes from a very long way away."

I swallowed the "where" that sat on my tongue and began imagining what this Mr. Porchek would look like. I imagined a portly man with puffs of long gray hair. He wore black trousers and a red jacket. Then, I dismissed that image, which even at the tender age of six I recognized as a version of Santa Claus. I went through the repertoire of men I knew, mostly uncles, rejected them all, and settled on Mr. Porchek as a tall stately man with a solemn expression and carefully groomed thick black hair, a version of Monsignor Losciki, who ran our parish church.

As the day wore on, I became more and more curious about our honored guest and began to bother Ray about him, assuming Ray's knowledge to be superior to mine, an assumption I dropped at age fifteen.

In this case, Ray did know more. "He's Dad's brother, dunce," Ray said. Ray never missed an opportunity to reinforce my belief in his superior knowledge.

I felt vaguely disappointed. Dad had three other brothers that I knew of and another uncle hardly seemed to warrant the solemnity with which my mother had told me about Mr. Porchek.

Since Poles begin Christmas Eve dinner at the sight of the first star, or at dusk if snow or rain clouds block the stars, Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick arrived at about four-thirty with our two cousins in tow. The four of us, Ray, Carol, Carl, and myself, sat in the parlor by the tree, guessing what was in the packages we would open after dinner. Poles traditionally open gifts on Christmas Eve, though Mom always hid a few gifts to be opened on Christmas Day. Ray and Carl scoffed and made gestures of oncoming violent stomach pains at Carol's and my own expressions of desire for dolls. Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick, who had come into the parlor with us as guards to foil any attempt to open packages, laughed.

At ten to five, the doorbell rang. I tensed, then relaxed, remembering that Mr. Porchek was only another uncle. But then I caught the look that passed between Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick. Aunt Catherine looked frightened and Uncle Dick looked grim and angry.

We waited in the parlor, and each of us kids stiffened with the tension we had caught from Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick.

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I heard Dad, who'd just come up from the cellar where he'd been tending the coal furnace, open the door. I heard Mr. Porchek deliver the formal greeting that Poles give when entering each other's homes.

From behind the frame of the parlor archway, I peeked at the kitchen entrance. I was astonished. Dad was holding Mr. Porchek in a bear hug, an unusual display of emotion for my loving but always reserved and polite father.

I turned to check with Ray on how to receive this display, but Ray had his mouth open in surprise, my very first inkling in a gradual process of realizing that Ray did not know all there was to know.

Even more disconcerting, Aunt Catherine had her head bowed and her hands clasped. Uncle Dick stood stiffly, staring straight ahead as if he were guarding some castle keep about to be invaded by the enemy.

I turned again toward the kitchen to watch Mr. Porchek hand Mother some rather wilted flowers. I wondered where, at the end of December, Mr. Porchek had found flowers.

I did not have time to ask the oracle, and anyway, Ray was still looking a bit unsettled. I saw him glance at Carl, who was staring at Mr. Porchek. Carl was two years older than Ray and, as I was very soon to learn, possessed even more knowledge than Ray of the world and its inhabitants.

Dad led Mr. Porchek into the parlor. We all stood silently for a moment, like frozen actors at the end of a climactic scene just before the curtain goes down.

Then Mr. Porchek bowed to Uncle Dick. Uncle Dick tipped his head down once. When he raised his head, he kept his eyes looking downward.

Aunt Catherine did not move.

I stood still, too, afraid to move, lest I blunder in some unforgivable way that would bring Mr. Porchek's wrath down upon me. For at that moment, I believed that he held some unassailably high position in the family. He did, but in a way I could not have imagined then.

In the silence, I could hear Mother running water. I thought I could also hear the snowflakes thudding against the ground outside, but I now believe that the noise came from my own tense and excited heart.

Finally, Mr. Porchek went forward to Aunt Catherine. He reached for her hand and lifted it to his lips in the formal hand kiss Polish men give to women. They stood like that for a moment, then Aunt Catherine began to cry softly. Uncle Dick mumbled something about helping Mother and led Aunt Catherine from the room.

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Dad led Mr. Porchek over to Carl and Ray and introduced him as Uncle Martin Porchek.

For the first time since Mr. Porchek had entered, I had enough wits about me to register what he looked like. I had not been far wrong when I imagined him to look like our tall, stately Monsignor. He had the same high cheekbones and firm strong jaw, only Mr. Porchek had curly hair, a soft white mixed in with the black that reminded me of the wool on the Christmas lamb that was always led into the church and up to the manger that the nuns had set up in the front of the apse. Usually the lamb sat quietly during Mass, but occasionally a lamb, for reasons best known to itself, got a little rambunctious, began to kick the straw about, and had to be led out.

Mr. Porchek did not look rambunctious. He looked sad and happy at the same time. His eyes glistened with tears, but he was smiling and nodding his head at Ray and Carl as if they looked just as he thought they should look. He reached into one of the deep pockets of his heavy gray coat, took out two packages, and handed one to Ray and one to Carl. He said something to Father, and Father turned to Ray and nodded.

Then Father, taking Mr. Porchek's arm, turned to Carol and myself. I looked at Ray for moral support, but he was busy opening his package, which shocked me since gifts were never to be opened before dinner. For a moment, I considered running into the kitchen to cling to Mother's skirts, but I rejected so undignified a move for which Ray would have teased me unmercifully.

Before I could even so much as back up a step, Mr. Porchek was standing in front of me, Dad having brought him first to me rather than Carol because I was the older child. Dad introduced me formally as Helena, not just Helen, Porchek. For a moment, I didn't know he was talking about me. I bowed my head, as Aunt Catherine had done.

Then, Mr. Porchek took my hand. I almost fainted, but Dad's smile gave me strength. Mr. Porchek lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. I fell in love.

Mr. Porchek reached into another pocket and handed me a small package. I managed to squeak out a "Thank you."

"Thank you, Mr. Porchek," Dad said, and I remembered that Dad had told me that it was polite to acknowledge by name the person who had given you a gift.

I repeated my thank you, adding Mr. Porchek's name, and watched with some degree of jealousy as he lifted and kissed Carol's hand. I felt pretty sure that he had not kissed her hand quite as softly as he had kissed mine, and I was sure that he had not smiled as broadly as he had at me. I thought, too, that her

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package looked a tad smaller than mine. I had no doubt that I was Mr. Porchek's favorite.

"It's all right to open the gift now," Dad said.

I began to remove the blue paper, barely restraining myself from ripping it off, a practice Mother considered very impolite to the person who had taken the time and trouble to wrap the gift. When I had finally unwrapped all the paper, I stared at the wooden king that lay in my palm. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The king had his arms outstretched, holding up an intricately carved open box, containing the gold, his gift to the Christ child. He had a silver crown atop his flowing black hair and, just below his neck, a star held together the ends of his blue cape.

I decided then that I would marry Mr. Porchek and remained determined to do so even after, a few months later, Ray, to whom I subsequently refused to speak for three days, told me I could not marry one of my uncles.

Having finished baking the fish, Mother called us all in for dinner. Clutching my king, I entered the room walking beside Mr. Porchek.

Not before or since did the dinner table look so romantically, glitteringly beautiful to me as it did that evening. Nothing could spoil that dinner, not even the frown that lowered the heavy eyebrows over Uncle Dick's eyes or the trembling of Aunt Catherine's hand when she held out her *oplatek* to Mr. Porchek and wished him peace. Uncle Dick offered his *oplatek,* too, muttering a standard wish for good health.

Then, Mr. Porchek slipped into the chair for the honored guest and sat looking at us all in turn, a smile hovering on his lips. He was an elegant guest in his blue suit with its striped vest. It was the beginning of my love of vests.

Mother handed the platter of fish, as was fitting, to the honored guest first. He took two pieces of fish slowly and carefully, as if he wanted to stretch out the dinner as long as he could. He handed the fish to Mother with a "Thank you" and a little bow of his head.

He said little during the dinner, only complimenting Mother's cooking and listening to Father's talk of the new church the parish hoped to build.

No one asked him any questions about himself.

One more incident happened at that dinner that convinced me of Mr. Porchek's worth, though, of course, I didn't realize until years later the significance of the incident.

Father picked up the white horseradish and handed it to Mother. She took a little and passed it to Uncle Dick. "Take a good deal, Dick," she said. "I've made some extra for you to take home." Mother knew how fond of horseradish Uncle Dick was.

I shook my head vigorously when Uncle Dick offered me some of

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the horseradish, as he did every year, teasing me because he knew how I hated the devil's dish, as I thought of it then, and still do.

Father laughed. "Helen has not yet acquired a taste for horseradish."

Mr. Porchek looked at me. "Perhaps little Helcia," he said, using the Polish version of my name, "is like me. Perhaps she, too, feels that horseradish is from the devil's own kitchen."

I began to plan my wedding.

When dinner was over, Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick left earlier than usual. Aunt Catherine kissed Mr. Porchek, and though I hated to see Carol and Carl leave early, I was not unhappy to see Uncle Dick go. He seemed to dislike Mr. Porchek, and so was born in me an antipathy for Uncle Dick that I carried for many years.

Father and Mr. Porchek sat at the table enjoying their coffee and talking while Mother came in to watch Ray and me open our gifts.

Afterwards, Ray and I went in to say goodbye to Mr. Porchek before we had to take an evening's nap so as not to fall asleep at Midnight Mass.

I thanked him again for the king, then, panicking at the idea that he would leave, screwed up my courage. "Wouldn't you like to come to Midnight Mass with us?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed, Helcia," he said, bending toward me, "but I cannot. I must return to my home."

"But there will be plenty of room," I protested. "Mother and Father always go very early. And everyone will sing carols. In Polish. And in English, too. Won't you come?"

"Helen," Mother said.

"Perhaps another year," Mr. Porchek said.

"But when will I see you again?" I said. Ray stared at me.

Mr. Porchek tilted his head. "Perhaps God will allow it to be soon."

But He didn't. I did not see Mr. Porchek again for three years. By that time, I'd decided that, boys being so clumsy and dumb, I would not marry at all. But then I would pick up my king and remember how gentle and kind Mr. Porchek had been.

When I was nine, Mother told me at Thanksgiving that Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick would be over on Christmas, but not on Christmas Eve. She said that Mr. Porchek would come to *Wigilia* that year. All my young love welled up again. But a week before Christmas, a dark cloud moved over my memories of Mr. Porchek.

Ray and Carl considered themselves much too worldly to hang around with the likes of Carol and me, but one cool evening the four of us were hanging around Larry's store, eating chips and candy and reading comic books, with a promise to Larry that we would indeed buy a few, when I mentioned that the drawing of

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Silas Marner in the comic classics version I was reading reminded me of Mr. Porchek.

"He looks lonely and sad, just like Mr. Porchek," I said.

"Well, if he's lonely, it's his fault," Carl said.

I challenged Carl immediately. "How could it be his fault?" I said.

Carl gave me his best look of pity. "You mean you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

Carl glanced round the store for spies, then leaned forward into our little circle. "I heard Mom and Dad talking. They didn't know I was there," he added proudly.

"So what did you hear?" I shouted.

Ray shushed me, looked at Larry and a customer over by the meat counter, and smiled reassuringly. "Almost got the comics picked out," he said.

Carl scooted a bit closer into the circle. "You have to promise not to tell anybody."

"Okay, okay," I said. I was getting sick of Carl's histrionics.

"Well," he said, puffing up his chest, "Porchek's a murderer."

We all stared at him. Even Ray looked shocked. Carol's mouth was open. I think mine was too.

Ray recovered first. "Who'd he murder?"

"Don't know, exactly," Carl admitted reluctantly, "but I heard Dad say that Porchek was taking a real risk coming back for Christmas. Dad said somebody would see him and recognize him. Then all that stuff about the murder would get stirred up and be in the papers again." Carl sat back, looking very satisfied. "I heard him say that."

"Well, who'd he murder?" Ray repeated.

"I don't know," Carl said. "But I bet it was somebody important, like the mayor, or somebody."

I recovered. "That's stupid. It's all stupid. If he was a murderer, he wouldn't come to visit on Christmas."

"Well, Dad said he shouldn't come," Carl said. "And Mom said . . . " He paused. "Mom said that we couldn't stop him. She said we shouldn't have let him go in the first place."

Carol piped up. "What's that mean?"

"Well," Carl said, leaning forward again, "I think Porchek's a mafia guy and . . . "

"What's a mafia guy?" Carol said.

"A gangster, stupid." Carl said. "I'll bet Porchek did a hit and then left town."

"Why would he leave town?" Ray asked.

"Because he hit the mayor or somebody big like that. He couldn't stay in town after that. The whole family would have been in trouble."

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I'd heard enough. "You're crazy," I said.

"I am not. You're just moony over a murderer," Carl said.

I dropped Silas Marner, jumped up, and leapt on Carl, banging his chest with my fists. He was so shocked he fell over.

Ray pulled me off him. "You're the crazy one," he said, glancing over toward Larry who, thankfully, was busy slicing some luncheon meat.

I struggled to get at Carl again. I hadn't finished with him.

"Stop it," Ray said, holding me by the arms. "Or I'll tell Mom."

That stopped me, but I could see that Ray was looking at me with newfound respect. "All right," I said. "But you," looking at Carl, "better not say anything about Mr. Porchek again."

Carl hadn't yet recovered from his shock.

"C'mon, Carol," I said, looking scornfully at Carl, "we've got better things to do."

Carol rose.

I looked down at Silas Marner lying at my feet. A big bubble rose from my stomach into my throat. I remembered Mom saying that we weren't to talk about Mr. Porchek to anybody.

When I got home, I threw up the potato chips and jujubees.

I brooded about Carl's story for weeks before Christmas. I considered talking to Ray about it, but I was afraid that Ray would just agree with Carl. So Ray and I avoided each other.

Finally, a week before Christmas, helping Mom bake cookies, I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Mom," I asked, "how come Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick aren't coming over for dinner this Christmas?"

"Aunt Catherine isn't feeling well."

It sounded a bit too pat for me. "Are they not coming because Mr. Porchek is?"

Mother turned and looked at me. "What makes you think that, child?"

I didn't reply.

Mother repeated her question, and I knew I wouldn't get out of that kitchen until I gave her an answer. I debated various lies and evasions, but settled on the truth. "Something Carl said."

Mom put down the cookie cutter. This was serious. "What did he say?"

I was in it now and there was no backing out. "He said Mr. Porchek . . ." I couldn't get it out.

"What?"

"He said Mr. Porchek was a murderer."

Mother pulled in a deep breath. She went over to the dining table and gestured for me to join her.

I expected her to tell me that Carl was a silly boy and that I

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shouldn't pay any attention to him. She would vindicate Mr. Porchek.

"Where did he hear that?" she said.

I despaired. I felt like I'd been sent to the principal's office. My teacher had told us that you would never mix up principle and principal if you remembered that the principal was your pal. But he wasn't, not when you got sent to his office. I didn't think Mother was a pal at that moment either.

"He heard Aunt Catherine and Uncle Dick talking about it."

Mother nodded, as if she'd expected that would happen.

"Is it true?" I asked.

Mother put her fingers over her lips as if she were preventing something from slipping out. "You needn't be afraid of Mr. Porchek," she said finally. "Helen, sometimes people have to do certain things. It can't be helped."

"Then he *is* a murderer," I wailed.

"Helen, do you know the difference between killing and murdering?"

I shook my head. "Aren't they the same?"

"Do you remember when Father set the mouse traps in October and caught the mice?"

I remembered it well. I'd named the little one "Tiny" and cried for an hour when Tiny got executed. Ray had scoffed. "Yes," I said.

"Well, Father didn't want to kill the mice, but he had to. He had to protect us."

"From Tiny?" I said.

Mother smiled. "Even Tiny could carry diseases. So Father had to do it, to protect you."

"So who was Mr. Porchek protecting?"

Mother hesitated. "All of us," she said finally.

I thought about that. "Did he kill the mayor?"

Mother's eyes widened. "What in the world gave you that idea?"

"Carl said so."

Mother smiled. "You mustn't believe everything you hear from Carl. Remember, Carl does not know what happened. What happened happened years ago when Carl was small. Nor is there any reason for all of this to be raked up. Mr. Porchek is our honored guest. We must treat him as such, for he deserves to be honored."

That was enough for me. I figured Carl to be a jerk, but I didn't tell Mother that. She would have objected.

So Mr. Porchek came as our honored guest for another Christmas and he brought me a second king, this one Caspar, carrying his golden urn of frankincense for the child. I put Caspar on my dresser, wondering if there would be a third.

Mr. Porchek was as gracious as he had been three years ago. He talked and laughed more this time, telling us all about the train

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ride from Chicago, where he was living, and all about the waves that battered the shore when winter winds roiled up Lake Michigan.

But he still had an air of sadness and loneliness about him, and my heart still beat faster when he kissed my hand.

Two winters later, I did a report on Silas Marner and got an A.

There was a third king when I was twelve and Mr. Porchek was our honored guest again. He had aged; his hair was whiter and he put on glasses when he read the Christmas message I had written for him. But he seemed happier that Christmas, and I, having fallen in love with the neighbor's son, who owned a spiffy new Mustang convertible, did not feel too betrayed when I learned that he was going to marry a widow with two children. Mother said he deserved happiness more than anyone she knew.

Mr. Porchek did not come our to *Wigilia* again. Aunt Catherine, looking more and more frail, returned with Uncle Dick, who grew more and more terse. Each Christmas I sat across from him, watching him eat more and more horseradish, and liking him less and less. He, after all, was the one who had first revealed, however inadvertently, that Mr. Porchek was a murderer.

Each year Mr. Porchek sent a little wooden card, like a thin piece of veneer, on which he had carved a scene: Lake Michigan with snow on its edge and the bright light of a star shining on its waters; a tall building with a Christmas tree in front of it; a lonely peasant gathering wood from a snowy field.

I wondered if he was happy with his wife and adopted children. I asked Mother, and she said she thought he was. I never asked her again about his tragedy and we never spoke of it.

The years passed. I didn't think much about Mr. Porchek anymore, except at Christmas when, faithfully, a little wooden scene would arrive. I would always write a thank-you note to the Chicago address. When I was older I thought of going to Chicago to visit Mr. Porchek, but somehow time escaped me, and I never went. I was busy with my life and the events of my childhood seemed insignificant and the old customs quaint but irrelevant. I did not see him again until the day of my Aunt Catherine's wake.

She had succumbed to congestive heart failure. As she had grown more and more ill, Uncle Dick had grown more and more withdrawn, devoting himself to taking care of her. At the wake, he looked small and lost. I didn't dislike him anymore.

Father had helped him with the funeral arrangements and the day of the wake, Mother and I were baking some dishes for Carl, Carol, and Uncle Dick so they would not have to worry about food after the funeral.

"Mr. Porchek is coming," Mother announced in the same solemn voice she had used twenty-two years ago.

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"I wondered if he would," I said. "Aunt Catherine is his sister, after all."

"Indeed she is."

"Mother," I asked, thinking about those Christmases with Mr. Porchek. "Why has he stayed away all these years?"

"I suspect," Mother answered, "that he found some happiness at last. He didn't want to return to a place where . . ."

She paused.

"Where he had known tragedy?"

Mother looked at me. "You never asked again." It was a question.

"No," I said. "I guess I'd imagined and believed my own story about what happened."

Mother waited.

"I imagined that he'd killed a real villain, someone who'd cheated poor widows or stole money from immigrants. Something from romantic literature."

Mother was silent for a moment. "You're not far from right, Helen."

I put down the potato peeler and looked at Mother. It was my turn to wait silently.

Mother was about to tell me the story when the back door opened and Father came in, shaking the rain from his hat. Mother fussed over him a bit for getting her clean floor, as well as his feet, wet.

Father came over to sniff at our pot of stuffed cabbage. "For supper?" he asked.

"For Dick and the kids," Mother said, then relented before Father's hangdog look. "But there'll be plenty for you."

Father looked satisfied. He took a chair at the dining table and watched us.

"Did you tell Dick that Martin was coming?" Mother asked.

"I did," Father said. "Dick said that it was too late."

"Too late for Aunt Catherine?" I asked.

Father said nothing.

I went to the dining room and took a seat across from Father. "Don't you think it's about time you told me the story of your brother?"

Father looked at Mother, who nodded.

"Perhaps it is, Helcia," Father said, using the name Mr. Porchek had used and the name Father used when he wanted to express his love for me as his little girl. "Martin . . ." He stopped and looked at Mother.

Mother came over and sat down. "I'll tell her," she said, "though she knows the heart of it. Martin killed a foreman in the mines," she said. "You were not even a year old, and Carol had just been

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born. He was a terrible man. The foreman, I mean. He sent the men into dangerous parts of the mines. He made them mine much closer to the river than they should have. He fired men if they refused or complained. And he started fights with men. He was a big man, and they say he killed a man himself once."

"But Mr. Porchek is not a big man," I protested. "How could he have killed this foreman? And why? Did the foreman attack him?"

"That's what the police believed happened," Mother said. "You see, the men worked in teams in the mines, and Chester Maliak, that's the foreman, complained that Martin and your Uncle Dick were afraid to begin loading the coal cars until all the dust settled from the explosive devices they used to blast out the coal."

"They were right to wait," Father said. "That's how the men got black lung. Lungs full of coal dust."

"And so this foreman attacked Mar . . . Mr. Porchek?" I said, incredulous.

"This was the coal mines," Father said quietly. "Even in the fifties things were bad in the mines."

"I know, I know," I said. I'd had plenty of friends whose fathers sat in chairs coughing up black phlegm. I'd always been thankful that Father had not worked in the mines. "But why did the police think Mr. Porchek killed the foreman? Did anybody see the attack?"

"No," Mother said. "But the police suspected Martin because he admitted that while Uncle Dick had been preparing more explosives in the upper tunnel, he himself had been working in a part of the tunnel where Mr. Maliak was found."

"But," I protested, "just because . . ."

Father interrupted, putting his hand on mine. "The police found a lunch bucket in the tunnel not far from the body. Martin admitted that it was his. Of course, it was only normal to have his lunch bucket where he was working. But, then, in another tunnel, the police found the coal shovel Maliak had been struck with. It was one of Martin and Dick's." Father paused.

"Was Mr. Porchek arrested?" I asked.

"No," Father said. "You see, no one could prove that Martin had been using that shovel. Anyone could have taken it in the morning. So there was no arrest."

"But then, why did he go away?" I asked, almost crying, twenty years of sensing injustice welling up from me.

"For the family," Father said. "He felt that everyone would forget sooner if he left."

"But why did you let him go?" I said to Father.

Father flushed. He looked at me squarely. "He would not hear otherwise than to go. He had honor and pride. He did not want the children of the family to grow up under a shadow."

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I nodded. "I'm sorry. I should have known that. I did know it. I mean . . ." I felt overwhelmed.

Mother put a hand on my shoulder. "We must get ready for the wake," she said. "We should be there when he comes to the funeral parlor."

I didn't know if she meant Uncle Dick or Mr. Porchek. But I wanted to be there for Mr. Porchek. He was important to me again, more important than the lawsuits and negotiations.

An hour later, we sat before Aunt Catherine's coffin at Jendreski's Funeral Home. Uncle Dick, sitting between Carol and Carl, was pale and forlorn. I felt sorry for him, but my deepest compassion went to Carl and Carol, and my fullest concern was for Mr. Porchek. Every time the door to the funeral parlor opened, I turned, anticipating his entry. I wanted to go to him, to tell him that I still had all his wondrous gifts.

At seven, he entered.

He shook hands with the funeral director and gave that slight bow of the head that always made him seem so much to belong to an older world and an older and more courteous time. He walked into the viewing room, and I stood up.

He smiled and mouthed my name, "Helcia." He had on a blue pin-striped suit with his usual vest and a light blue shirt that made his blue eyes even bluer. His hair was a thick silver-gray. He was stooped, but steady when he walked.

I couldn't move. I just stood there, as struck by the whole Old World romance of his being as I had been twenty-two years ago.

He came over, lifted my hand, and kissed it.

"Hello, Mr. Porchek," I said.

Mother heard and turned. He kissed her hand, then tilted his head, looking at the coffin. "Catherine," he said, "Catherine."

Dad heard, came over, took Mr. Porchek by the arm, and guided him to the coffin. I followed and stood behind Dad and Mr. Porchek.

Mr. Porchek blessed himself at the coffin, knelt, and prayed. Then, he rose and touched Aunt Catherine's hand lightly. "Rest in peace," I heard him say. Then he turned to Uncle Dick. He held out his hand. "It is all past now," he said.

Uncle Dick looked up and nodded. He took Mr. Porchek's hand, held it for a moment, then released it.

Dad led Mr. Porchek to a chair.

I followed and sat on his right, letting Dad talk with his brother. But I was impatient and tense. I wanted my Mr. Porchek to myself. Finally, I cleared my throat several times. Mother, sitting in front of us, turned, looked at me, then told Dad that she wanted

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to talk to him in the outer room. I made a mental note to take her out to her favorite restaurant.

Mr. Porchek and I talked for forty-five minutes. I told him that I still had his gifts. He told me how he had carved them. We talked about my career and my travels and his stepchildren and wife.

Then I asked if I could come to visit. He urged it, smiling and nodding and, in a slanted script, wrote down his telephone number and his address.

Someone put a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see Dad. Concerned that his brother looked tired, Dad urged him to come home and rest from his journey, as the funeral the next day would probably prove taxing. Mr. Porchek agreed. He went up to the coffin again, talked to Carl and Carol, under my watchful eye, then gave something to Carol. I learned later that it was a picture of himself and Aunt Catherine as children. In the picture, he had an arm round his little sister and she was looking up at him with an unconditional worship I recognized immediately.

The funeral went by in a blur of candles, prayers, hymns, and relatives, few of whom I paid any attention. I hovered over Mr. Porchek, seeing to it that he sat with the family, ate properly, and wore his coat at the windy gravesite.

I did not wait many days after the funeral before I went to the library. I didn't think that I would find anything, but I had to look. The librarian helped me dig out the yellowed issues of the *Times Dispatch* from twenty-eight years ago.

I piled them on the table, pulled up my chair, and picked up the first one. FOREMAN KILLED. The first article gave a straightforward rendering of the events, with somewhat more colorful language than a newspaper would use today: Foreman Maliak succumbed at Mercy Hospital at six. His family had gathered round his deathbed for their final sorrowful goodbyes. Chester Maliak never regained consciousness from the dastardly and deadly blow that had been delivered to his head. His attacker remained unknown.

A subsequent article focused on his career in the mines, spanning some fifty years from his days as a breaker boy, separating the valuable coal from the ore, to his promotion to foreman.

The next article focused on his presumed attacker: Martin Porchek. "It was known that animosity existed," the article said, "between Martin Porchek and Chester Maliak." The reporter had interviewed some miners who had talked of the animosity. Only at the end of the article did the reporter note that animosity existed between Maliak and most of the miners.

Then I came to some articles that dealt with the questioning of Martin Porchek. The police had focused on him because he admitted that it was his lunch bucket that had been found near the

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scene of the crime. According to the article, the lunchbox, one of the old black kind with the rounded tops to hold a thermos, had apparently been kicked, probably accidentally in the scuffle between Martin and Maliak, about ten feet away. In his haste to leave the scene of the crime, the reporter speculated, Martin had neglected to retrieve his bucket.

Martin, the article went on, never admitted to or denied killing Chester Maliak. No evidence to prove unequivocally his guilt or innocence had ever surfaced.

I put down the paper. The articles had told me nothing.

I rifled disconsolately through the remaining four papers, but only one had anything further on the incident.

The reporter had interviewed a few more miners, two of whom had placed Martin, Uncle Dick, and two other miners near the scene of the killing. The reporter reviewed the evidence concerning the head wound, inflicted by a coal shovel belonging to Martin and Uncle Dick, and described again the one item found not far from the body and claimed by Martin: the lunch bucket. The reporter dutifully listed the contents of the bucket, standard lunch fare for the miners except for one item.

I looked round the library, slipped the paper into my purse, gathered the rest together, delivered them to the librarian with only a tinge of guilt at my theft, and raced out to my car.

I wanted to go to the public square with my news, but I knew Father and Mother would have to know first.

Mother was repairing a tear in one of Father's sweaters when I came racing in. She looked up at me with disapproval when I let the door slam.

"Helen," she said, shaking her head, "you know that we do not slam . . ."

"Mother," I said, "where's Father?"

"What's wrong?" Mother said, rising.

"Nothing's wrong. Or everything's wrong. I need to tell the both of you."

Mother peered at me over her glasses, then went to the stairs to summon Father.

I sat them both down at the table and told them where I had spent the afternoon. They looked at each other.

They remained quiet while I told them what I had read. Finally, I came to my climactic discovery. "The reporter described what was in the lunchbox," I said, triumph increasing the volume of my voice. "From his description, I know that Martin never killed that foreman. And I know who did."

Mother and Father looked at each other again.

"One of the items in the lunch bucket," I said, anger rising in

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me, "was a jar of horseradish. Uncle Martin and I hate horseradish," I almost shouted.

Mother and Father sat quietly.

"But," I said, almost accusingly, "Uncle Dick loves it." I addressed Mother. "You and Aunt Catherine always made jars of it for Uncle Dick. It was his bucket. He killed the foreman."

I was joyous. I had exonerated my beloved Uncle Martin.

Father nodded his head.

Only then did I realize what their silence meant. "You knew," I said, standing up in my indignation. "You knew, and you let him take the blame, all these years. And you didn't tell me the truth."

"Helcia," Mother said, "we did not know at first. And Father could not tell you. You are unfair to your father."

Father put a hand on her arm. "Yes, I knew," he said, turning his head to me. "Not immediately, but a few days after it happened. I guessed. And I told Martin I knew. He refused to let me tell anyone. He made me promise not to tell anyone. Except Mother. He knew that I would tell Mother. But he also knew that Mother would honor his wish. He took the blame, and Uncle Dick let him. But he never held it against Dick. And you mustn't either."

"Not hold it against him?" I sputtered. "How not? Why not?"

"Because you have come to love Martin for his kindness and his generosity. Just as he loved his sister Catherine and her children. He did not want them to suffer, to be without a father. He had no wife, no children. So he went away, letting Carl and Carol grow up without the shadow that he took on himself."

I sat back down. I wanted to shout to the world that Uncle Martin was innocent, that he was a man who had sacrificed himself for others. But I knew Father was right. I would not tell Carl or Carol or anyone. There were more important values than justice. I would not make Martin's sacrifice empty by revealing his secret, and I wouldn't hurt Uncle Dick needlessly, though I couldn't promise not to hold it against him.

"Uncle Martin will come with his family to be with us on Christmas this year," Father said. "It would be best, Helcia, if you said nothing of this to him. It is past, as he said. He has moved on. To bring this up now would only hurt him."

I sighed and took Father's hand. "Of course. I will not disturb him. He is our honored guest." ●

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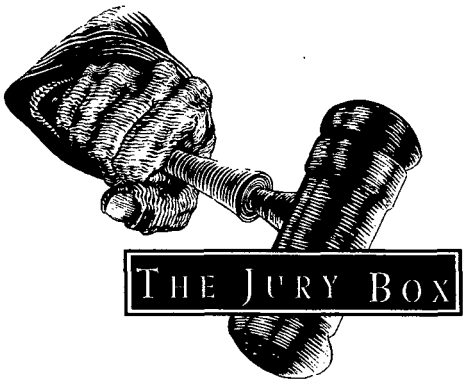

by Jon L. Breen

How many times have you read that a writer of mystery, romance, horror, westerns, fantasy, or science fiction has "transcended the genre"? The phrase makes many writers and fans cringe, not only because it's a cliché but because of the implied insult to the author's chosen category. There are more crime fiction writers with serious literary ambition than ever before, and the best of them aren't transcending the genre at all: they are simply using its elements and conventions unusually well. K.C. Constantine and Thomas H. Cook, two eminently serious writers, have spent virtually their whole careers writing about crime and detection. It will be interesting to see how large they eventually loom among late-20th and early 21st-century novelists.

**** K.C. Constantine: *Grievance,* Mysterious, $23.95. Rocksburg, Pennsylvania, detective Rugs Carlucci, who has succeeded retired police chief Mario Balzic at center stage of Constantine's novels, investigates the murder of a wealthy and hated local industrialist while confronting a crisis in his psychologically and physically painful relationship with his demented mother. Rugs is a brilliant cop and as complex and sympathetic a character as his mentor Balzic, who makes a brief but important appearance. You have to evoke the names of major American playwrights like David Mamet, August Wilson, Amy Freed, Sam Shepard, and Richard Greenberg to find parallels for Constantine's extraordinary gift for dialogue that captures the poetry and eloquence of everyday speech. He also writes a genuine detective story, albeit a highly unconventional one with some mysteries left unsolved.

**** Thomas H. Cook: *Places in the Dark,* Bantam, $23.95. In a small Maine coastal town, two brothers have each grown up

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following the lead of a different parent: narrator Cal their cautious and practical journalist father, the younger Billy their romantic and risk-taking mother. In 1937, a beautiful and enigmatic young woman with terrible secrets brings profound changes to the brothers' lives and their relationship. Two keys to Cook's success are his evocative, lyrical writing style and his mastery of story structure, including an ability to shift in time and dole out information selectively without losing clarity or antagonizing the reader. His finishing revelations meet the three-way test: they are surprising, believable, and fairly clued. If some of the final loose-end-tying is a little too neat, that's a minor complaint.

**** Michael Collins: *Fortune's World,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 trade paper, $40 signed limited hardcover. Adding this book to *Crime, Punishment, and Resurrection* (1992), all the shorter cases of New York and Santa Barbara private eye Dan Fortune have now been collected. As in the Fortune novels, devious puzzle-spinning and a strong social conscience combine to produce powerful and thought-provoking tales. Most of the 14 have previously appeared in *EQMM, AHMM,* or original anthologies. The last, "Family Values," appears for the first time. An introduction by academic critic Richard Carpenter, individual story notes by Collins, and a complete checklist of the Fortune novels and stories add to the volume's value. (Buyers of the limited hardcover will receive a separate pamphlet of "The Dreamer," a story about Fortune's predecessor as one-armed shamus, Slot-Machine Kelly, originally published in *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine* as by Dennis Lynds.)

*** Paul Charles: *The Ballad of Sean and Wilko,* Do-Not/Dufour, $31 cloth, $15.95 paper. Camden Town police detective Christy Kennedy and his team look into the locked-room murder of an old rock band's lead singer. In the course of the investigation, they gather a wealth of inside information about the popular music business in Great Britain while confronting a complex puzzle out of the Golden Age 1930s. The murderer is a bit obvious and the locked room solutions offer nothing original, but Charles, who lists among his influences Colin Dexter and John Dickson Carr, gives fans of classical detective fiction a promising new writer to watch. Kennedy's on-and-off romance with pretentiously lower-case journalist ann rea could get tiresome very fast, however.

*** Val Andrews: *Sherlock Holmes at the Varieties,* Breese, $12.95. When a falling sandbag barely misses comedian George Robey during a vaudeville performance, Holmes is hired by the theatre manager to ferret out the "ghost" haunting Murphy's House on the Green.

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Robey, whose hobby is making violins, engages Holmes on a possibly unrelated mystery in which a copy of a classic instrument is unaccountably replaced by the original. Anyone conversant with British theatrical history will be way ahead of Watson in anticipating the dramatic climax, which is followed by a bit too much falling action, but Andrews's command of the style and characters and his tidbits about music halls and varieties make it all worthwhile. Among the most prolific authors of Holmesian pastiche, having produced at least ten earlier volumes, Andrews may, if this example is typical, also be one of the best.

** Shelly Freydont: *High Seas Murder,* Kensington, $20. In her second case, modern dance director and amateur sleuth Lindy Haggerty joins her troupe on a music-themed New Year's Caribbean cruise—fellow travelers include numerous high-strung performers and a poisonous critic. This is a typical contemporary cozy. The style is pleasant, the show biz background interesting and knowledgeable, and the plot serviceable, even including some fair-play clues. Combining to sabotage these virtues are unconscionable padding and the resultant snail's pace.

The reprint of Juanita Sheridan's 1949 novel *The Chinese Chop* (Rue Morgue Press, P.O. Box 4119, Boulder, CO 80306; $14), besides offering a well-written and enjoyable variant of the boarding-house whodunit and a vivid picture of the post-WWII New York City housing shortage, puts the lie to the common misconception that strong, self-reliant, non-spinster-or-comic female sleuths didn't appear on the scene until the 1970s. Chinese-American Lily Wu and her novelist Watson, Janice Cameron, are young and feminine but not dependent on men, and it's hard to imagine how even Asian-American readers could object to the admirable Lily, some now-politically-incorrect terminology apart. According to Tom and Enid Schantz's typically informative introduction, Rue Morgue will also reprint the subsequent three books in a regrettably short series.

Charles Willeford's *Writing & Other Blood Sports* (Dennis McMillan, 11431 East Gunsmith Drive, Tucson, AZ 85749; $30) is a handsomely produced collection of the revered author/teacher's critical and autobiographical pieces. Included are essays and interviews of Willeford by others; reviews of such writers as Chester Himes, John D. MacDonald, and Ross Macdonald; advice pieces for prospective writers; and Willeford's master's thesis, *New Forms of Ugly,* first published in a McMillan limited edition in 1987. Eleven of the essays have not been previously published.

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The Cure
BY DAVID HANDLER

Fair Exchange
BY RUTH RENDELL

Comes the Revolution
BY GREGORY FALLIS

Hit-and-Mrs.
BY NEIL SCHOFIELD

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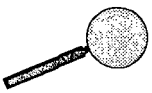

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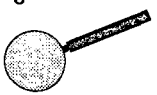

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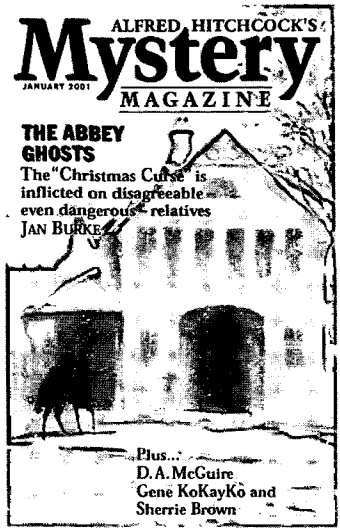

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